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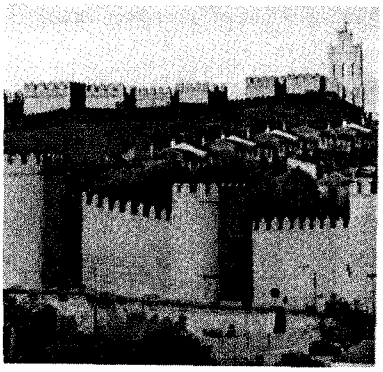
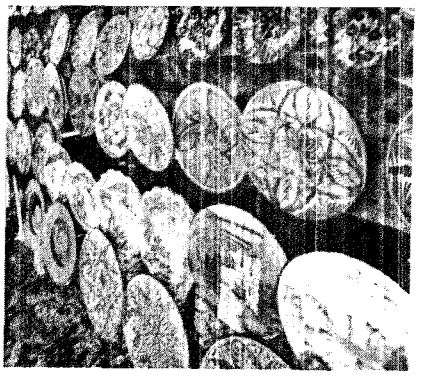
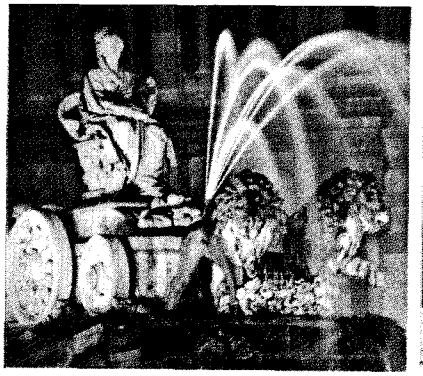

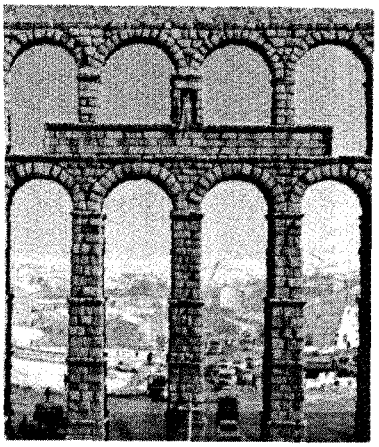

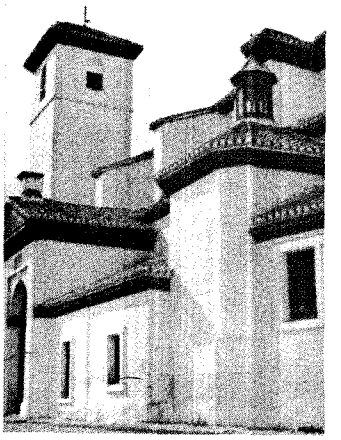

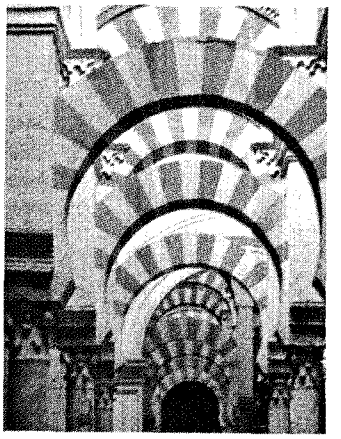

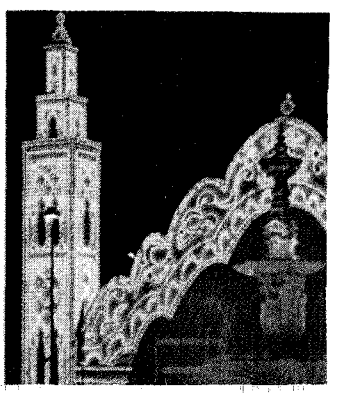
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Europeans know more about Europe than you do. That's why they vacation in Spain.

In the world of travel, Spain is one of the few bargains remaining for the tourist.

But Spain doesn't attract millions of Europeans just because of what they can save there. It's attractive to Europeans because of what they can do there.

SOME OF SPAIN'S HISTORY YOU CAN TOUCH. SOME OF IT WILL TOUCH YOU.

The cave drawings of La Pasiega at Santander show how ancient man interpreted his world. While in Barcelona, the Miró Foundation and the Picasso Museum show how these giants have interpreted what's modern.

Lugo, in the northwest corner of Spain, is one of the few cities in Europe still enclosed by original Roman walls. While the ancient city of Mérida, on the road to Badajoz, has Roman ruins that rival that of even Rome itself.

The Giralda tower of 12th century Seville was once one of the tallest buildings in the world. It is still one of the most beautiful. And was used as a model for skyscrapers at the turn of this century because of the grace and style of its Moorish architecture.

The magnificent stained glass windows in the cathedral of León are a marvel to look at. But the cathedral is even more marvelous when you consider that so huge a Gothic structure can support itself, while its sides are practically walls of glass. And as outstanding as this is, the cathedrals of Santiago, Burgos, Segovia, Toledo and other cities are equally as outstanding.

EVERYTHING FROM BIG-GAME HUNTING TO BARGAIN HUNTING.

For the adventurer who wants the thrill of being a matador but not the danger, there are bull farms throughout Spain where he can cape young bulls.

The deep-sea fisherman and fresh-water angler will find it a pleasure to fish almost everywhere in Spain. But for tuna and sword-fish, Lanzarote in the Canary Islands is particularly good. While the mountain-fed streams from the Pyrenees and Galicia are excellent for salmon and trout.

Within an hour's drive of every city, you'll find some of the best hunting in Europe. Outside of Toledo, for example, you can stalk deer and stag. And just a short drive from Seville, you can hunt wild boar.

Of course, if you'd rather hunt down antiques than animals, you don't have to go any further than the Rastro—Madrid's enormous flea market where almost anything is game. And if it's handicrafts you're after, you won't have to hunt at all. Because they're easy to find in almost every town.

So it's not surprising that so many Europeans are attracted to Spain.

After all, when you come from a place that's filled with enchantment, you don't travel to get away from it. You travel where there's even more of it.

For more information, see your travel agent or contact the nearest Spanish National Tourist Office: 665 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022/664 No. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. 60611/3160 Lyon Street, San Francisco, Calif. 94123/Casa del Hidalgo, St. Augustine, Fla. 32084.

SPAIN

Where more Europeans vacation than anywhere else in the world.

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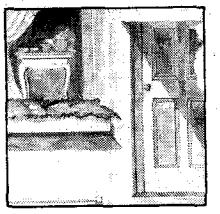

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CAMEO
THE MAGAZINE OF ROMANTIC FICTION

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Cover Illustration by Franco Accornero

A spring morning finds Dr. Geoffrey Aldernay and Jennie Bertram on the English country street where they live, from the novel *. . . And Be My Love.*

A Letter from the Editor

Dear Lover of Romance,

Welcome to CAMEO, the magazine of romantic fiction!

CAMEO's namesake has a history that is centuries old. Originally created as a symbol of personal remembrance, each delicately crafted cameo imparted its own unique charm. You will discover that unique, special charm month after month in the hours of delightful reading CAMEO has to offer.

Explore with us the endless possibilities of romance. Every issue of CAMEO will offer you novels, short stories, poetry and special essays portraying past and present realities that have been transformed by the magic of love.

Many of CAMEO's readers have already taken the time to write to us offering comments, support and suggestions. Please take a moment to express your feelings about CAMEO by completing the questionnaire in this issue or by dropping us a note.

We look forward to sharing this romantic adventure with you.

Sincerely,

Manon Tingue

Manon Tingue
Editor

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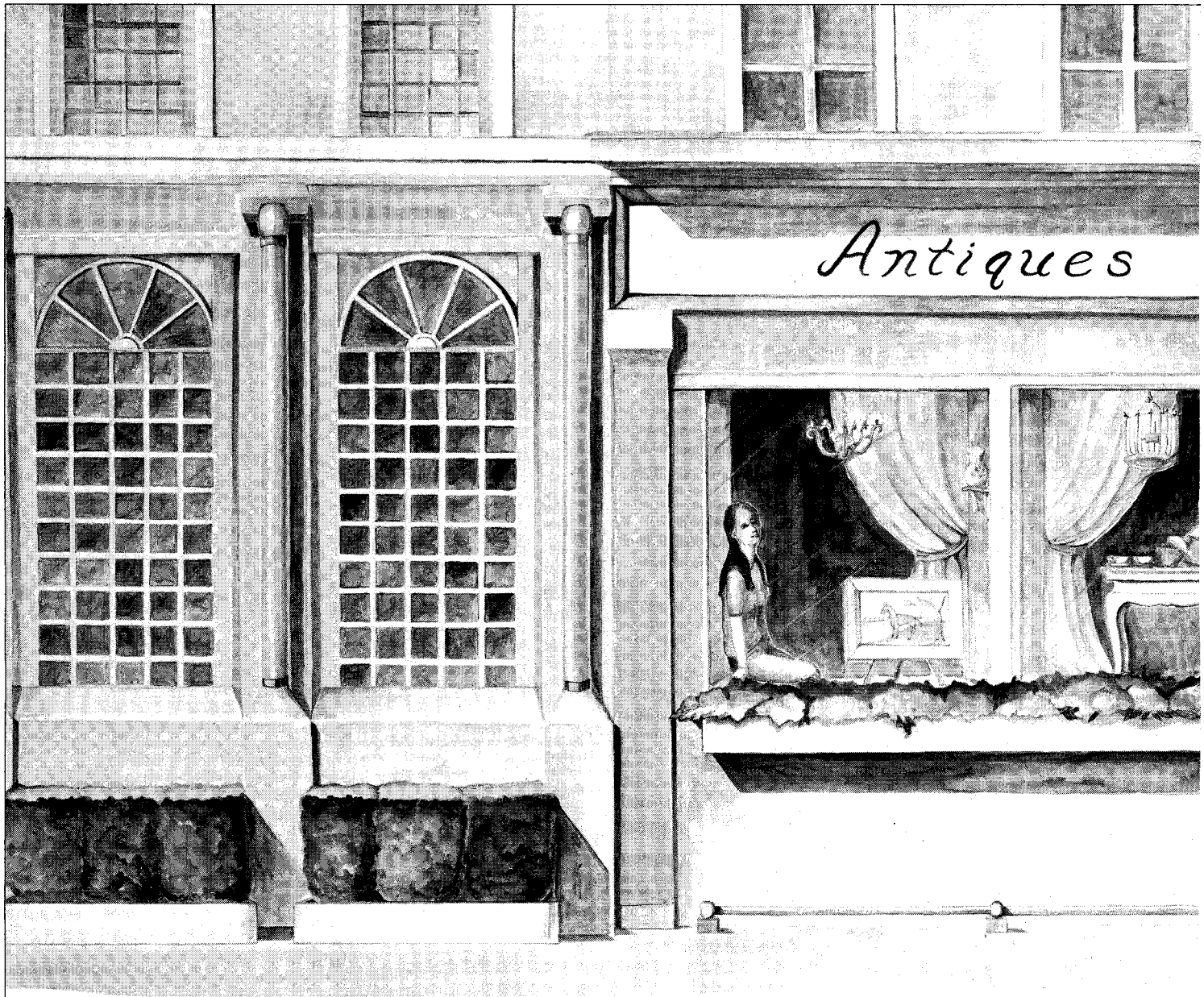

NO LOVE LOST

For years Martin had longed for the unattainable Paula . . . then along came a lovely liability . . .

It was amazing. Martin could not decide which was more incredible; that hers should be the first familiar face that he saw in his old home town, or that seeing her, after several years, should have the same remembered impact on his nervous system.

It was an electric shock—a spasm of combined pleasure and pain at seeing her again. She was quite unchanged; the same magnificent eyes and ash-blond hair.

"Well!" she called to him across the roof of her cream sports car. "The wanderer returns!"

"Hello, Paula." Even then he began to feel unequal to the occasion. "How lovely to see you."

"And you." She smiled. "That's a disgusting tan you've got. Where was it you went—Africa?"

"Er, America, actually. South America." It irritated him that she had no notion of where he'd been for the past couple of years.

A short story by Lorna Cartledge

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Illustrated by Karen Brown

"And you're home for good, or what?"

"I'm not sure. I've been offered another tour, but I haven't decided."

Inevitably he glanced at her left hand. It was bare, and she twisted it in front of him, like a conjurer. "Free as air! I'm having too good a time to tie myself down."

He wondered how true this was. Her claim sounded slightly too shrill. In the old days she had only tolerated his attentions. He had expected no more. One day things might be different, but why should Paula, attractive and popular, the only child of wealthy, influential parents, have bothered with him—gawky, spinster-reared orphan that he was?

Once, when their respective schools had combined to present *The Mikado,* Martin had been in charge of lighting. She had flashed those blue eyes over her fluttering fan, and he was lost from that moment.

On the night of the last performance he had walked her home to her parents' big house, and then, assembling every ounce of his courage, had kissed her.

She had laughed. It was the high-pitched giggle that she had used in the show, and it began the long thread of hurt that ran right through his tenuous relationship with her. Two weeks later they left school, and he heard she was going out with the young art student who had played Ko-Ko in the play.

That was the end of the beginning. They met from time to time, but she flirted with him merely to tease him or to arouse someone else's interest. She joined him on dates only with the deliberate implication that she had nothing better to do.

Now he sensed that circumstances were considerably altered, and as if to confirm this, she ran her fingers over the smooth, blue surface of his car. "Nice," she said warmly. "Is it yours?"

"Not exactly. I've hired it for my two months' leave, if that's what it turns out to be."

"It certainly suits the new image." Her gaze left the

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car and flickered over his broadened shoulders, the light gray, tropic-weight suit, and lingered on his suntanned face. What he saw in her eyes was something he had never seen there before. Approval. It warmed him like sunshine.

He said abruptly, "Could you have lunch with me? Today? We could drive out to the Wagon Wheel."

The look that crossed her face was unmistakably one of disappointment. "Not today, Martin. I'm sorry. I have to meet a client for Dad."

He had another idea. His aunt would be out for most of tomorrow. Paula could come to the cottage for lunch, and he could cook her a special Venezuelan dish. Working for her father, as she did, she wouldn't have to rush away, would she?

"Super," she said, and flashed him her gorgeous smile again.

It was almost too easy, he thought, and frowned as she walked away, tall, elegant, secure in the knowledge that she was being watched, and admired.

On numberless nights Martin had lain in his wooden hut, part of the sprawling camp that overlooked the dam they were building, and called her deliberately to mind. When he took off for the city with his fellow engineers for a few days, he always found himself searching for someone like her. There weren't many beautiful ash-blond girls in Caracas, and none he met were as lovely as Paula.

"Nothing if not consistent," he said to himself now mockingly. For him the only girls in the world were statuesque blondes. And he could prove it. That girl parking her moped, for instance. Pretty as she was, she did nothing for him because, to begin with, she was too small, with jet-black hair. She wore jeans and rushed across the parking lot like a mad thing. He continued to watch her and winced as she dodged among the hooting traffic before leaping into an antique shop on the other side of the road.

Martin was determined that his lunch would be a triumph. It was a beautiful morning. He had gone to Kimberton first thing to buy his ingredients. Nothing too eccentric. Later, perhaps, he would really show his skill in the kitchen.

He was amazed at the variety of foreign vegetables available. He hadn't expected to find yams and sweet potatoes in Kimberton High Street and said so to the smiling Indian who managed the grocery store.

"Oh, yes!" another customer said, turning toward him enthusiastically, her long black hair swirling round her shoulders. "Mr. Swami has everything from everywhere. Well, almost. Smell this!" And she rubbed a grubby piece of fresh ginger and thrust it under his nose.

Would Jove appoint some flower to reign
In matchless beauty on the plain
The Rose (mankind will all agree).
The Rose, the Queen of Flowers should be.

Sappho (circa 600 B.C.)

"No," she corrected. "You really need to shut your eyes." She held the root under her own neat nose and closed her eyes so that her long lashes curled on her cheeks like a child's.

She sniffed ecstatically. "If you close your eyes, you can imagine you're in some exotic, far-off place. Tropical sunshine and hibiscus flowers!"

In that instant Martin recognized her as the little lunatic who had almost been mangled in yesterday's traffic.

Mr. Swami laughed. "She is a dreamer, this one. Wake up now and pay what you owe me."

The girl opened her eyes and blushed to see Martin staring at her. She paid her bill at once, and when she darted out of the shop, Martin held his breath for a moment, half-expecting to hear a screech of brakes as she hurled herself into the street.

"She's mad," Martin murmured.

Mr. Swami smiled. "Yes indeed. Very lovely, but certainly a little mad. Now, sir, what can I do for you?"

Martin liked cooking. He sang snatches of Spanish songs as he chopped beef, onions, and green peppers. He couldn't believe that Paula was really coming to lunch.

He carefully arranged spiced rice on an oval platter. Everything must be just right. A bottle of good wine, the best Brazilian coffee afterward in his aunt's most precious china, but they would start with an apéritif—out on the lawn perhaps, since it was so warm. Yes, he would be lounging in the garden as Paula drove up, and he would go to meet her. . . .

He was still wearing his aunt's apron and scouring an accumulation of dirty saucepans when Paula arrived, cool and stunning in cream silk jersey. She stepped into the kitchen and cocked her head indulgently. "My goodness! Quite the little housewife, aren't we?"

She came up to him, tilting her face. Almost too late, he realized she was waiting to be kissed. Awkwardly, he brushed her lips with his own, unable to touch her with his wet hands, but Paula seemed quite at ease, and wandered into the living room.

"I'd no idea this cottage was so roomy," she called back. "You could do a lot with it. Furnish it with antiques for a start. I have a friend who could fix you up with just the right pieces."

"At a price!" He laughed and followed her into the room with the sherry.

"Come on now, Martin." She smiled at him over her glass. "Don't try to tell me you're not doing quite well for yourself."

The garden idea was not good. Paula understandably declined to sit on the mildewed rustic seat, and her heels sank into the rain-softened lawn. She admired the roses but shivered when a slight breeze rustled the apple trees.

They went indoors.

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Martin wondered ruefully why he did not feel as happy as he had before she'd arrived. Nothing had really gone wrong, nor did it seem likely to. The meal looked as though it had been catered.

He did not, of course, expect a girl like Paula to eat with the gusto of a famished farm worker, but he felt that she ate without much relish.

"Tell me if it's awful," he said anxiously.

"Heavens, no. It's delicious. It's just that I seldom eat much at noon. I was just thinking, on the way over, I should have suggested that we go to the Gold Club. Of course, they don't do anything as exotic as this"— she waved her fork over her colorful plate—"just a good plain English snack, but it would have saved you all this bother."

"It was no bother," Martin said quietly.

What a knack she had of putting him down. Long ago there would have been pain, humiliation. Now he just felt irritated. Perhaps it showed.

"No, I'm sure," she said hastily. "It must have taken you *ages,* though—and if we'd gone to the club, we could have had a quick round of golf this afternoon." She smiled coyly. "I guess you've spent quite a bit of time on the golf course!"

He wondered what kind of image she had of his job—of him. He took a mouthful of wine and filled up their glasses. Paula, opposite him, was far away at the wrong end of the telescope. Beautiful, but remote.

He felt himself suspended—in limbo. But the hummingbirds in Caracas had been real along with the morass of rock and dust. And the waterfalls as high as the heavens. If he closed his eyes he could be there just as the little girl in the grocery store had said. He smiled, remembering her.

"Penny for your thoughts!" Paula offered, putting down her fork in a final sort of way.

He stood up. "I'll get coffee."

"I know. You were thinking about—wherever-it-is. I expect you had a fantastic social life."

Martin stirred the coffee. Swimming parties at the lavish homes of wealthy contractors. Gossip and gambling in the lamplit coffee shops of Santa Maria, the local village. And lonely nights in his tiny, bachelor bungalow—countless paperbacks and the news on the radio.

"It varies," he said.

"Ah, present tense," Paula noted. "You *do* intend to go back."

He thought he probably did. More experience. More savings for a better beginning here when he did settle down. But she was pushing him into decisions he didn't need to make yet.

It was about then that he broke the coffee cup. He could not say how. Paula bent down swiftly to retrieve the pieces and together they examined them. She was standing very close to him. Her perfume enveloped him. He could have taken her in his arms and kissed her and she would, he knew, have kissed him back, almost certainly without laughing at him. It was curious, but he did not particularly want to.

He turned a piece of the cup sadly in his fingers. "My aunt thought a great deal of this coffee set."

"I'm not surprised," Paula said, holding two fragments of the base together. "This stuff is worth a small fortune now. In fact—" she broke off excitedly. "Can I make a phone call?

"It's this friend I told you about," she said, dialing. "The antique dealer. I'm pretty sure . . . Hello? Is Howard there? Oh, I see. Well, look, I'll tell you what I'm after. . ."

Martin watched her, perched on the arm of the sofa, poised and posed like a glamorous actress in a comedy.

"Look, I'm almost certain . . . the glass-fronted cupboard. One cup and saucer. Right?" Her hand covered the mouthpiece. "Honestly, for someone who's supposed to be learning the business. . .Hello? Ah, I thought so. Splendid. Now just hang on to it, will you? A friend of mine will be in—later today?" She raised questioning eyebrows at Martin and he nodded.

"How about that?" she said brightly as she put down the receiver. "Howard's away at a sale, but his assistant has managed to find what we want. Your aunt need never know."

"Thanks," Martin said, impressed.

"Oh, come on, now. All that efficiency"—she was moving toward him, her arms outstretched—"*must* be worth more than just 'Thanks.'"

Martin drove into Kimberton in the late afternoon with a feeling of light-headedness that he could no longer attribute to the lunchtime wine. He wondered if this was how a snake felt after it had shed its skin, as he had shed Paula—a part of himself, but something he no longer needed.

He had idolized her for so long and he had never got beyond the illusion. Now, with maturity, that illusion was lost, and there was nothing left but the clear knowledge that Paula was shallow and spoiled, and more than a little insensitive to the feelings of

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others.

He drew into the parking lot and then crossed to the antique shop. Inside, there seemed to be no one to serve him. A young woman was examining some glass paperweights and turned when she heard him.

"Good after—Oh—hello!"

He was hardly surprised to see that it was the dark-haired girl again. He had been thinking of her as he crossed the road.

"Do you spend all your time in shops?" he asked.

"I spend a lot in this one. I work here. Can I help you?" Despite her cool words, she had blushed when she recognized him. Now she fidgeted, tidying the paperweights. In some of them the snow was falling over woodland scenes.

"I was just testing them," she said hurriedly, "to see if they still worked. They're old, you know." The more she said, the more flustered she became.

"Oh, no, you weren't," Martin said sternly. "You were seeing if you could get all the snowstorms going at the same time."

Her brown eyes widened. Then she laughed, delightedly.

Martin grinned. "I'd probably do the same if I had to work in this grim old shop all day."

She stiffened slightly, her chin lifted. "It's not that bad," she said. "You prefer to work in a grim old office all day, I suppose?"

It seemed perfectly natural, then, to tell her about his work; he had promised himself faithfully that he would never bore people at home with details of an existence that was foreign to them. But this strange girl was really listening, rapt and receptive, to his stories of lizards and earthquakes, and hydroelectric power schemes.

"So you see," he said, "it's not all sunsets and hibiscus flowers."

"I know," she said seriously. "I know about floods and cockroaches and famine and corruption. I wanted to join the VSO—you know, Voluntary Service Overseas—but no one seemed to think I would be any good. So now I just read about them."

"And smell the fruit in Mr. Swami's shop?"

She nodded. He felt he wanted to lift her chin again, and her spirits. She touched a sad chord in him—reminded him of someone.

"I came about a cup and saucer," he said, deliberately destroying the moment.

"Ah, yes." She, too, was suddenly businesslike. "Paula—Miss Finching—rang." She placed the dainty cup and saucer separately on the counter between them.

"It beats me how she knew they were here," Martin murmured.

"Oh, she's very interested in the business. Well, I expect it's important really." The girl was chattering nervously again. "Not that they're actually engaged—she and Howard—but I suppose they soon will be. They get on so well together, and they're both very clever. Sometimes she takes over here, and she's wonderful with customers. She always makes me feel worse than useless." The girl spread her hand in a gesture of hopelessness.

It was only a small movement. She seemed hardly to touch the delicate china and yet it sailed unerringly off the end of the counter and on to the floor.

"I see what you mean," Martin said drily as they knelt over the wreckage.

Her face was in her hands once more, and again her shoulders trembled, but this time Martin realized she was crying.

His own emotional response was frighteningly powerful. No electric sparks, but a molten fusion of feelings.

"Please don't cry. It really doesn't matter," he said softly. Without having to think about it, he reached out and gently took her hands from her face. Her wrists felt very frail in his strong fingers. He desperately wanted to hold her, comfort her, but she was battling for self-control, and it would have been unfair.

Together they picked up the pieces, and she shook her head. "What can I say?" she whispered. "It was a miracle we had this in the shop, and Paula said how important—It might be months before—And when I saw it was you, I was so glad that we had it."

"What's your name?" Martin said.

The girl looked up at him. "Rosie."

He could not help smiling. It suited her so well. "Sweet Rosie," he said, "be quiet a minute and listen." He picked up the cup, the one piece that remained, whole and perfect, on the counter. "*This* is what I came for. I didn't want the saucer. I'll pay for that, too, but it's only the cup I need."

Her face was shining, smudged with mascara and tears, but radiant. "Oh, thank goodness. How marvelous! No, I'll pay for the saucer. You won't have to tell her, will you? Please don't, because she'll tell Howard, and he already thinks I'm a liability."

And Howard was dead right, thought Martin, surveying the slight girl in the simple cotton dress. A lovely liability—so long as everyone kept telling her how useless she was.

He looked at her face, sensitive and vulnerable—the face of a dreamer—and he knew who it was he saw in her. It was himself. The boy he had allowed to be trampled and panicked into impossible situations was recognizable in this scatterbrained girl. He had found his own feet, at last, through his career, but what chance had she with people like Howard and Paula breathing down her neck?

It was closing time, and he waited while she locked up the rear of the shop. It was dim in there now. She moved among the ancient furniture like a ghost, and he could hear clocks ticking in the gloom.

Martin was urgently conscious of limited time. "Could we meet again?" he asked. "Later this evening?"

Her voice came, soft, disembodied. "Yes, if you'd like to."

Out in the noisy street he held her arm firmly as she headed for the curb. "One thing about Santa Maria," he muttered cheerfully. "There's very little traffic!"

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A Gift of Love

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon

By Alicia Martin

Praying for composure, Amytis stepped down from her sedan chair onto the cobbled street and grasped the hand of the tall man standing before her. Involuntarily, her other hand flew to her forehead to shield her eyes from the glaring sun.

The stranger bowed. "Welcome to Babylon, Highness. I beg you, go slowly, with care." As he spoke, Amytis was reminded of her father, for these were the same words he had used a week ago, the day she left her homeland, Media. The stranger's soft voice brought back the picture of her father, bidding her farewell under the graceful palm trees that framed the entrance to his palace. "Go slowly, with care, little one." Then, she had been so numbed by the thought of all that was ahead of her that she could do no more than smile at her beloved father who would no longer be her protector.

"The King is a good man, Amytis," her father had said. "I have made a good marriage for you."

"Highness," the stranger said, "I am Aban, here to do your bidding. I trust that you had a safe and pleasant journey."

"Thank you," Amytis whispered. Shading her eyes against the torrid sun, she looked around to see waves of rolling plains in the distance. But, unlike the hills of Media, they were brown and dry with not a tree in sight. Amytis shifted to get away from the searing sun. Her throat felt parched and her body ached from the heat.

"Ah," Aban said, "Your Highness is not used to heat such as this. Closer to the river there is a cool breeze. But forgive me, Highness. Let us move quickly into the palace where the air is cooler." He made a slight gesture to the slaves standing by. Some of them sprang to unload Amytis's cases and trunks from her sedan chair; others, jostling one another in their haste, led the horses and camels from her caravan to the stables. Aban's eyes missed nothing. Amytis could sense the steel under his gentle exterior.

Aban put a hand under Amytis's elbow and guided her into the archway that led to the palace. As they walked towards the huge bronze doors guarding the palace, Amytis stopped to stare for a moment at the intricate bas relief on the doors. The hundreds of figures, dancing and running in the massive carved scene, seemed extraordinarily alive.

Aban smiled at her with delight. "We call it *Enuma Elesh*, the Epic of Creation."

"Who is this?" Amytis asked curiously, pointing to one of the more elaborate figures.

"Tiamat," Aban said, "who represents sweet water. And over there is Aspu who represents salt water. We have both in Babylon."

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At an unseen signal from Aban, the great doors majestically opened. Inside the palace, the air was cool and fresh and some of the weariness left Amytis's body. She followed Aban down a long, tiled corridor, stopping him now and then to ask questions. She was struck by the brilliance of the blues, greens, reds and yellows of the enormous mosaics which decorated the walls.

"Perhaps tomorrow, Highness, may I show you the city so that you may learn some of our history?"

For a little while the nervousness that had filled Amytis since the beginning of her journey had left her. Now, all at once, it came flooding back. Drawing a deep breath, she brought her lovely, dark eyes to Aban's.

"Yes, naturally, I would like to know more of your history, and I want very much to see your city. But when shall I meet my betrothed, King Nebuchadnezzar?"

Aban gazed at her keenly and Amytis sensed that he could see that she was afraid. But he said smoothly, "It is arranged that you shall know him on your wedding day, Highness, and not before. You shall have the week to rest and prepare yourself before the ceremony and feast."

In the days that followed, Aban was Amytis's constant guide, showing her first the palace with its magnificent friezes and the vaulted rooms where metalwork and ivory carvings adorned the walls. Through Aban, she began to learn much about the King, especially his passion for science and magic.

"He has created a method for studying the stars, Highness," Aban told her. "And he spends much time on the roof of the Kasr watching the gods in the heavens."

Later in the week, Aban brought her to the tower of the North Palace Kasr from where she could see the entire city.

"There, Highness," Aban pointed, "is the river Euphrates, that gives us our water. The King created the canals so that no area would be without irrigation. And over there is the pantheon, the Temple of Marduk, haven of all the gods. From here you can see all of Babylon. It is a magnificent city."

Aban stopped to gaze over the city. Amytis stared at him in silence.

"There, across the river," Aban continued, "is the temple of Nebo, the god of wisdom, who rules over the arts and sciences. Once a year he crosses the river to visit with the gods here. There is a magnificent procession and great feasts when the gods are united. 'Babylon' means the Gate of the Gods—the most glorious temples known to man are within these walls."

Aban paused and looked at Amytis.

"Aban—it is a beautiful city," she said quietly. "I mean no disrespect to the King, or to his people, or to the city of Babylon itself. I mean this to be a marriage of peace, a marriage to unite our two countries. This is as my father wished, and I share his wish. But—"

"But—?" Aban prodded gently.

"I wish only that the sun would not pierce my skin as a dagger—and, forgive me, Aban, I miss the cool shade of the trees and the green of their leaves."

"Ah, Highness, I am sure that soon the air will seem cooler to you and the sun will seem to shine less harshly."

"Perhaps," Amytis murmured and felt herself trembling with apprehension. She looked up at the man she had come to think of as her protector. If she had not been so innocent, she would have recognized that she had fallen in love with him. Impulsively, she reached for his hand.

"Aban, after I wed—will you still be here to do my bidding—as you told me when we first met?"

"Oh, yes, Highness. Always." Aban looked at her closely. "But you are afraid, Highness. Tell me, of what?"

Amytis bowed her head. "I do not know the King. I fear we are very different and that I will not please him."

Aban reached out and gently raised her chin. "Highness," he said earnestly, "your beauty and the beauty of your soul would make any man worship you. Do not be afraid. The King will want only your happiness."

The following day Amytis stood ready for her wedding ceremony. A calmness had settled on her spirit. She was dressed in a magnificent white caftan, threaded with gold; a delicate lace shawl was draped around her shoulders and a sheer scarf was wrapped

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Illustrated By Mary Kornblum

around her face to hide her hair and mouth.

She followed the procession down the long corridors of the North Palace and through halls that were hushed and silent. At the end of the last corridor, she saw Aban waiting for her and her eyes lit up with joy.

"I am so pleased to see you," she whispered as he stepped forward.

"You are very beautiful, Highness," he said softly. "You must take my arm. I am to escort you to the Kasr Pavilion where you will join with the King." He smiled at her, his eyes glistening.

She held tightly to his arm and when he felt her trembling he said, "You are being honored, Highness. Have no fear, for it is a great day for you."

As they walked through the rotunda, crowds of people strained to see their new Queen. Despite her nervousness, Amytis managed to nod in acknowledgement to her audience.

"First, you will climb to the roof of the Kasr, where you will be wed," Aban told her quietly. "The procession will shower you with flowers and praise. Then, you will go with the King to the Temple of Ishtar where you will be blessed by the Goddess Ishtar, the Goddess of Fertility."

They walked on into the Kasr Pavilion. Unbelievably, Amytis felt a pleasant breeze waft across her skin and the air seemed cool and moist.

"Where are we?" Amytis gasped. "What is this?"

"This is the entrance to your wedding Pavilion," Aban said and a great smile appeared on his face.

Amytis stared at the explosion of green before her—the terraced walls and stone borders. Colorful blue tiles created images of animals and mythical beasts in blues and yellows to match the color of the flowers. Fruit trees, some in flower, others laden with fruit, stood at every level of the magnificent garden. Ferns and palms draped their leaves over the tiers and tiers of mossy earth. As she and Aban climbed the terraced courtyard, Amytis saw a mammoth splashing waterfall coursing through the trees and walls.

Aban led her down one of the terraced steps towards the waterfall, guiding her along the brick path with its velvet carpet of lush green grass on either side. Amytis could glimpse the blue of the sky through the fronds and she was lost in wonder.

"Does the sun seem warm to you now?" Aban asked, his dark eyes anxious.

"But why could you not tell me this existed before? I cannot believe—" Amytis could not go on.

"It is your wedding gift, Highness, created for you as a shelter from the heat of Babylon . . ."

"But how could the King know how the heat feels to me?" Amytis cried.

"Because he knew your Media is a green and fertile land, Highness. These lands were created for you the minute he was granted your hand in marriage. The King wants a happy Queen, not one homesick for her father's land."

As they reached the highest tier of the gardens, Amytis saw the slaves carrying water up and down the terraces to irrigate the flowers and trees. Massive arches separated the tiers from one another and brilliantly painted frescoes and murals were painted and tiled into the arches. On the highest tier a carved throne stood between two lapis sculptures; one depicted the god of thunder and storm, the other the god of creation standing over the dragon of chaos.

Aban led Amytis to the throne embedded with scarabs and jewels. She stared at its carved inscription:

"Is this not great Babylon, which I have built for the royal dwelling place, by the might of my power and for the glory of your majesty?"

Tears were rolling down Amytis's cheeks as she turned to Aban. "The man who built all this," she said, "has the soul of a poet. He is a far greater man than I dreamed. But where is he? Does he perhaps think I am not worthy of him?"

"Do you not know, my Amytis?" Aban asked, looking at her intently.

A wild hope surged through Amytis. She could scarcely breathe.

"I am your King, my beloved." He reached out and gently stroked her cheek, wet with tears. "Do not cry, my dearest. I built this for you because in my heart I always knew I would love you. But now I realize that my love for you is tenfold more powerful than my greatest imaginings and our joy in each other will be tenfold greater than that. Come, let us be wed."

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Illustrated by Leora M. Sies

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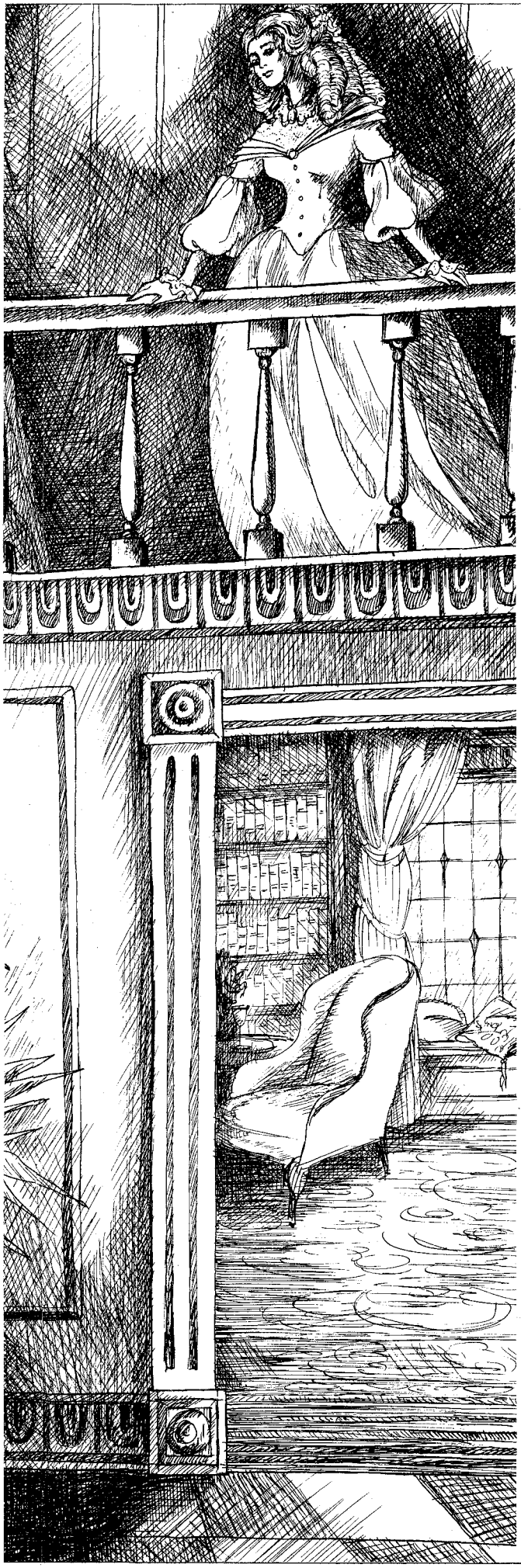

Kingman's Lass

Even though her wealth had vanished along with the man she loved, Hester knew her spirit would survive . . .

Hester Kingman looked around the disordered room. In the silence it seemed she could still hear her father's words. "Do you want him, lass? If you want him you shall have him." She had always hated it when her father spoke in that way, arrogant and boastful. "If you want him you shall have him"—as though Richard Sharratt were a commodity to be bought or sold.

She leaned her forehead against the windowpane, gazing down on the lawns and flower beds. The neat gravel drive now showed the comings and goings of the day. The last time she had looked down on it like this was the night of the dinner—the 18th of January, 1842—the night she had first met Richard. It had been smooth then, freshly prepared for guests. The Sharratt carriage had rattled and chinked its way up to the door, and Hester had turned and run down the wide staircase to take her place at her father's side.

The long table glittered with silver and crystal, her father sitting at its head in his great carved chair. A gold chain that might have held a watch hung from his waistcoat button. Opposite him sat her mother, sparkling with the symbols of Kingman wealth.

Sir John and Lady Sharratt could not have been more different—slender and pale, aristocrats both of them and scarcely an ornament in sight. "Oil and water," Hester had thought wryly.

How did her father put it? "It's our turn now." No longer was inherited wealth enough, or the possession of a proud name. The times belonged to men like William Kingman—hard bargainers, and, she had to admit in a burst of honesty, unscrupulous men who were as ruthless as the occasion demanded.

Not that her father was mean. "My servants live better than most moneyed folk" was his proud boast. He had fought his way up from a two-room hovel to a mansion set on a hill. No point in hiding it, lass," he said when her mother suggested a less prominent site. The house was built and furnished to his own specifications and was the grandest house in Sedgelake. Then the flow of guests had begun—iron manufacturers, grain dealers, merchants with overdressed wives, and at last, the Sharratts. They owned the coal pit at Sedgelake Scar. "Bloody dabblers" her father

A short story by Denise Robertson

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had labeled them when he heard how they managed the pit, giving pension schemes and sick pay to their workers and sending promising youths to the church school.

The Sharratts had owned land in Durham for three hundred years, and the pit at Sedgelake Scar had been a rich source of revenue since the last century when a newly invented engine had solved the problem of flooding. Water still flowed through the workings into the pit and the miners might have to wade through knee-high water, but the coal flowed freely—black gold to line Sharratt pockets.

And now Kingman was after that coal, the entire output of the Scar pit, though he preferred to be a middleman, skimming off the cream and avoiding an employer's responsibilities.

All England was crying out for coal—coal to feed the factory furnaces and the steam engines of the new railways. The Sharratts, who could have sold their coal anywhere, had chosen to deal with Kingman. "They won't regret it," her father had said. "I'll treat them right." The dinner party was to set a seal on the contract, but for Hester more than a contract was sealed that night.

Richard Sharratt was tall and fair, his face pale and almost delicate, but his wrists were large and strong and she could see the muscles of his thighs strain beneath their worsted covering.

Hester and Richard talked, at first of trivialities and then, as the others fell to discussing business, of Sedgelake—of the dirt, the poverty, the confusion of a town that was growing too fast. Later, safe in her bed, Hester had gone over the night's events, savoring each word, remembering Richard's face light up with conviction as he talked about the future and a better life for the Sedgelake poor.

"They need homes, Miss Kingman. Proper homes with space for the children to grow. And water, good water, brought to their doors. If I have my way there'll be changes." Hester had listened, her dark head downcast, her hands folded neatly in her lap. But her thoughts raced. She could work with Richard, be his companion, his helpmate. She looked at the pale face, so different from her own rosy one, and longed to touch it with her lips.

She had been so careful, so circumspect. Trust her father to guess her secret—nothing escaped Kingman. "Do you want him? If you want him you shall have him."

She bent her head, examining the fabric of her gown for nonexistent flaws. When at last she raised her eyes, they were clear. "I don't know what you mean, Dada," she said. His laughter had followed her as she sped through the hall and up the wide staircase to her room.

Hester lifted her head from the cool windowpane and let the garden swim back into focus. She looked around the room at the tumbled piles of clothes, the braided skirts and flounced petticoats, her favorite yellow fur-trimmed robe crushed beneath another mantle. She had worn the yellow costume the day Richard took her and her mother to see the school at the Scar. She had watched him with the children, smiling into their eager faces, answering their questions, and she had known she would love no other man as she loved him. The children were rosy-faced and healthy, unlike the children she saw in town, who were gray-faced from the factories and workshops.

No child had been allowed into the Sharratt's pit for twenty years or more. Richard spoke of it with pride, going on to speak of the horrors he had seen in neighboring pits. There were accidents caused by entrusting the closing of air doors to children hardly weaned. There were children who, in winter, never saw daylight except on Sundays, and were left alone in the dark passages for hours at a time save for the passing and repassing of the pony-drawn carts. Most pits had only one shaft, and any damage to it left the men entombed, perhaps forever. The Sharratts had sunk a second shaft at the Scar to allow a means of escape if disaster struck.

Richard spoke movingly of the fate of the apprentice lads—orphans or children from poverty-stricken families who were taken at the age of nine and apprenticed to a miner. The arrangement lasted for twelve years, during which time they earned no wages. Their wage was paid to their "masters," who then fed and clothed them as badly as they dared. Hester had flown home to her father, her cheeks flush with indignation.

Kingman listened as the words tumbled from his daughter's lips. "It's the world, lass," he said when she paused for breath. "Some up, some down. But every man has his chance. Some of us takes it, some don't." Hester turned away then, sensing the steel in him, the iron will. He had been an apprentice to a nailmaker when he was twelve and was expected to beat out a thousand nails a day.

Hester loved both her father and Richard—the one hard and demanding, the other gentle and soft-spoken. Yet there was a strength in Richard for all his gentlemanly ways, a quiet courage that commanded her father's respect. She watched the two men together and smiled, cherishing her secret. Then, one day, descending the garden steps, she slipped and would have fallen except for Richard's outstretched arms. She gasped and clung to him for a second and felt the answering pressure of his hands. Looking up into his face, she saw that he, too, was confused, unwilling to draw away and yet afraid of their continued closeness. Gently she withdrew her hands from his and smoothed her rumpled gown.

"Thank you," she said demurely.

"My pleasure, Miss Kingman," he said fervently. "My pleasure indeed."

"He'll speak for you soon," her mother said complacently when they talked of Richard. "They're fine folk, the Sharratts. Real gentry."

Hester had smiled in what she hoped was a noncommittal fashion

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but her heart raced at the thought of being Richard's wife. Whispered tales of married love heard at her girls' school in York meant nothing to her now. She could never fear Richard, whose spirit was as gentle as a lamb.

The Kingmans called upon the Sharratts, sitting uneasily on the satin-upholstered sofas. Kingman furniture was new, heavy, and deeply carved while the Sharratts kept to the Regency style. Sir John and Lady Sharratt were courteous to Hester, but she could sense a chill, a restraint in their manner. She was a Kingman after all, but one step removed from the gutter, and not all the money in the world could compensate for that.

"They'll take to you in time," her father said as the carriage jogged back home. *He reads my mind,* Hester thought in horror. "Or they'll take to the brass you bring with you," he went on. Her mother clucked indignantly in her corner, but Hester, safe in the darkness opposite them, smiled in relief. She was a Kingman after all and something of a catch.

And then the blow had struck. One moment they were safe in their grand house, surrounded by trinkets and silver. The next moment the sheriff's officers were at the door demanding their dues, and her father was sunk in his chair, a little old man with a face of stone. Longman's Bank had gone under and with it her father's fortune, carefully collected in the bank to complete the Sharratt deal. Kingman had kept all his assets in Longman's—why should he not?

He had trusted Longman—thin, austere Longman who never missed Sunday chapel or spoke an extravagant word—and all the time the man had squandered his own enormous fortune and then in a desperate bid to recoup his losses, he had used his clients' money, throwing good money after bad.

When the truth emerged, through betrayal by a bitter employee, the run on the bank began. Desperate lines formed, people anxious about their pitiful savings.

Kingman refused to believe that such a thing could happen. "Longman's? Longman's failed? Never! Never in God's world!" By the time he was forced to acknowledge the disaster, the doors were locked at the bank and all was lost.

Her mother collapsed, and was taken immediately to her room. The servants went off in an indignant gaggle, led by the manservant, Joel. It was left to Hester to accompany the sheriffs from room to room, watching them collect her mother's prized china and tumble the contents of closets and wardrobes onto the floors before they carried the valuables away.

At last, when they were done, she went to her father's side. His hands were cold and damp—like a dead man's hands, Hester thought and shuddered. "Hester . . . I'll make it up to you. I'll get back. I overreached myself, but I'll put things right. In a day or two I'll ask around. There's many a man owes me a favor."

He paused then and Hester waited, clutching his hand between her two warm palms. "Young Sharratt . . . he cares for you, Hester, but he's confused. You mustn't blame the boy. He must go his father's way."

Hester shook her head vigorously. "Why bring him up, Dada? I care no more for Richard Sharratt than a dozen others I could name." She bent forward and gave what she hoped was a coarse laugh. "Too pale, too thin, Dada. Too dreamy for a husband. It's a man I want when I wed, not a milksop." She looked into her father's eyes and trusted that the faint gleam she saw there was relief.

She left him there, slumped in his chair, the dregs of a bottle of wine in his hand and only his thoughts for company. She listened for a moment at her mother's door but there was silence, so she went to her own room. It had been four hours since the arrival of the sheriffs and a day since the collapse of the bank. The word would have flown around Sedgelake, airborne from mouth to mouth until it reached Richard—high-principled Richard who cared for the poor . . . but not enough, not quite enough. He had cared for her—she had sensed that beyond any doubt. But his family had held him back until they were sure of her standing and now it was settled. If he had not come to her when he heard of her father's downfall, he would not come at all.

She let the tears come then—hot tears that ran down her burning cheeks and sought refuge in the folds of her neck. She would have been happy with Richard, made him the best of wives. She thought

(Continued on page 72)

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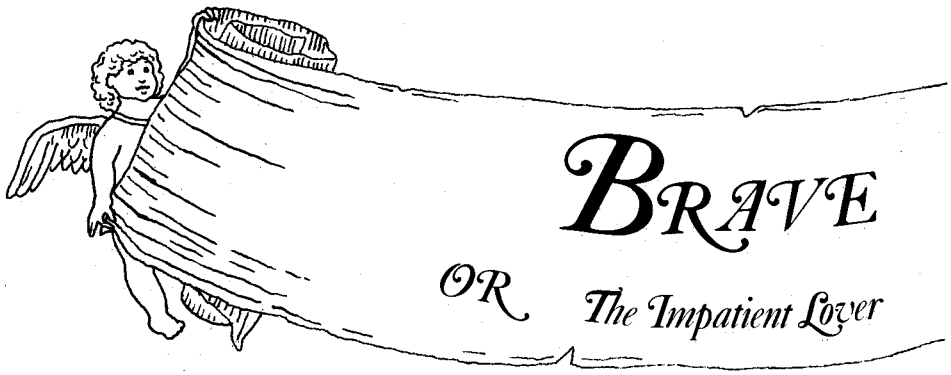

BRAVE
OR The Impatient Lover

Brave Algernon sighed, and smote his chest,
And rumpled the lace on his velvet vest.
"Oh, dearest," he cried, "for thee I pine!
Come fly with me, I'd make thee mine!

❖

For love of thee, I'd gladly die!
Oh, Sweet, don't let a day go by
Without my arms around thee, dear.
Oh, how I crave to hold thee near!"

❖

He sighed again, and tore his hair,
And gazed full soulful at the Fair.
Angela, coy, shook out her fan,
Bright eyes on the impatient man.

❖

"Such haste is most unseemly, sir!
Indeed, consider what a stir
So ill-advised a flight would make.
Restrain thyself for gossip's sake

❖

If not for mine. Besides, I've vowed
That never lover be allowed
To share my life until he prove
His valor, and his right to love."

❖

At that, poor Algernon turned pale,
And staggered back. To think he'd fail
The mark to reach with such a maid,
Remembering his friends' wagers laid.

❖

That Angela would bid him go—
Such fate o'erwhelmed his heart with woe.
He rolled his eyes, his fist he clenched,
And fair Angela's arm he wrenched.

"I'll go away!" he threatened, dire.
"I'll smother me in the first mire!
I'll dare the jungle dark!" swore he.
"An ivory hunter, chieftain, be.

❖

Or pick a fight with Keith, the best
Swordsman in Europe, so confessed.
I'll let him kill me, and then see
How sore contrition will crush thee!"

❖

Angela smothered a dainty yawn.
"And now, good sir, do please be gone.
Thee talks so much of when we'll wed:
Really, thee needs sense in thy head!

❖

Thy violent words I value light,
Such as to fright a maid by night.
So, leave me now, and stay away,
Until thee some fierce dragon slay."

❖

Algernon clenched his teeth in vain,
And rolled his eyes and groaned with pain.
There are no dragons left, he thought.
Alas! To what a pass I'm brought!

❖

That idle, vain and foolish dame
Insists I carve myself a name.
So what to do? Indeed, I'd make
Myself a hero for her sake.

❖

He fiercely scowled as home he rode,
On wild, fantastic dreams he bode.
Three friends of his who saw him come
Sought to lighten his mood so glum.

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ALGERNON

A Ballad by N.M. Fries Gohagan

Behind a tall and thorny hedge,
They lay in wait, a flying wedge,
And rushed at him with clamor loud.
Poor Algernon with fright was cowed.

❖

But when his friends he saw, he said,
"I deemed that thee were robbers dread.
Thee scared me not at all, but say
A thought I have to save the day!

❖

My friends, grant me a boon, and hide
At this same spot. My Fair doth ride
Along this road tomorrow eve.
The other details to me leave.

❖

But do rush out and make as though
Off with the lovely dame thee'd go.
I'll come along and take her part.
Perhaps so might I win her heart."

❖

His friends agreed. The snare was laid.
All unsuspecting rode the maid.
Algernon bold took up his stand
Behind a rock, his sword in hand.

❖

The maid was late, and dark it grew.
Algernon smiled. His friends, he knew,
Would keep their word, and rush en masse,
As soon as Angela would pass.

❖

Angela's plumed hat passed the hill.
Three men rushed out with clamor shrill,
And seemed about to steal the maid.
Algernon's sword on them he laid.

❖

Right wildly he about him lashed,
With flat of sword the others thrashed,
Sparing no pains to make it real,
A bit surprised their strength to feel.

❖

And so in all the dusk he fought
To impress her whose hand he sought.
Angela crouched against a stone,
And uttered plaintive moan on moan.

❖

At last, with bruises sore, they fled.
Algernon mopped his weary head.
Angela's arms around him flung,
Her sweet weight on his neck she hung.

❖

"My bravest of the brave!" cried she.
"Oh, Algernon! No more I'll be
So cruel. Of course, we'll wed, and so
Right speedy to the Kirk we'll go."

❖

He clung to her, his pulses danced.
Along the townward road he glanced,
And dizzy grew. He staggered then
With terror, for he saw three men.

❖

His friends, indeed! They'd been detained,
Nor cared how Algernon attained
His lady's love with valor bright,
Such as became a real knight.

❖

The highwaymen he'd fought were real!
Algernon knew at last the feel
Of might in arms. He bent to kiss
His lady's hand, and knew high bliss.

Illustrated by Wayne Atkinson

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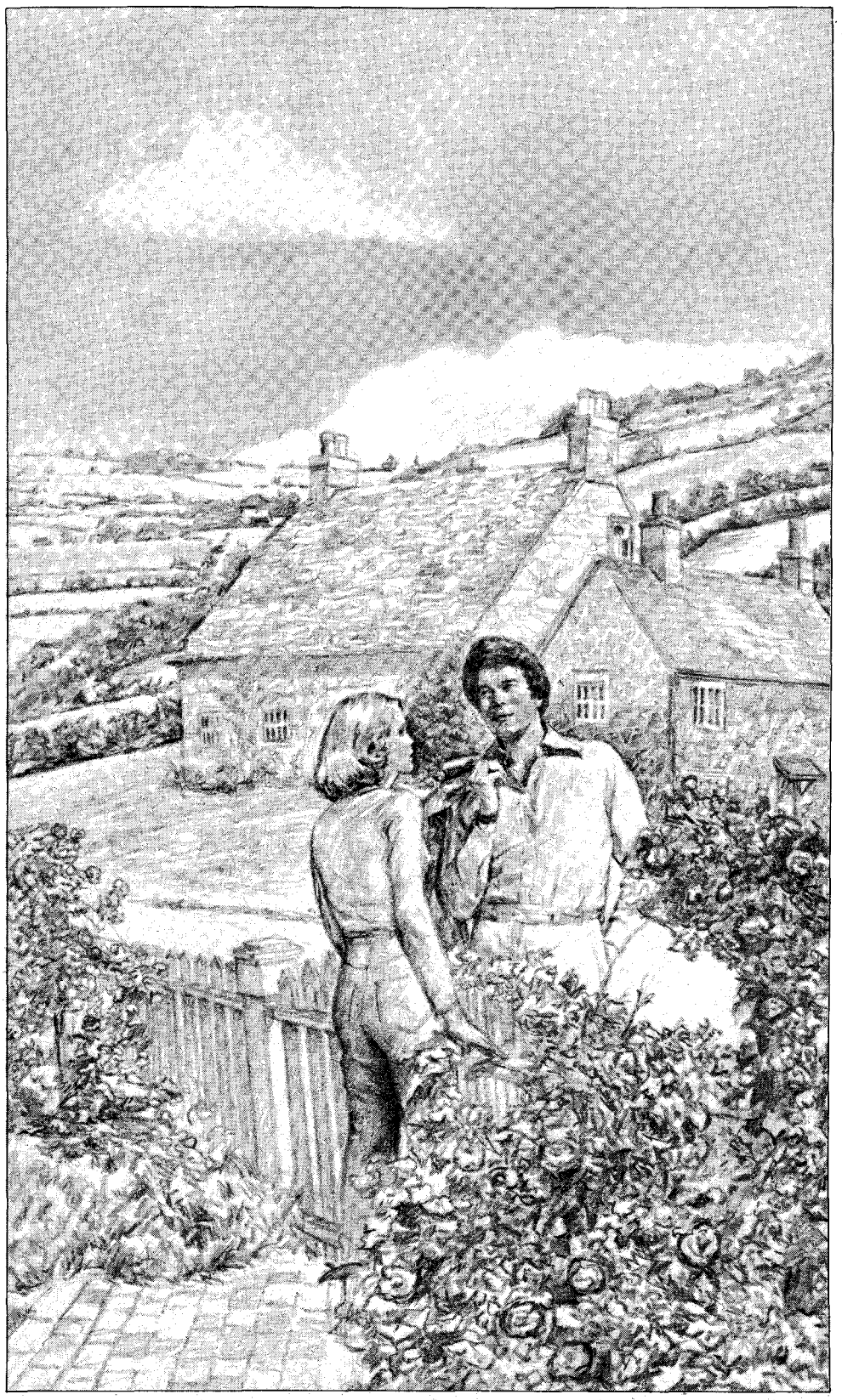
...And be my love

BY
TILLY
ARMSTRONG



Illustrated by Gary Lang

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A
CAMEO
NOVEL

"You mean I own a house?" Jenny asked incredulously.

"A somewhat dilapidated cottage," Mr. Alderney corrected her.

"But property!" Jenny Bertram pointed out earnestly. "I must say, I don't understand it in the least, Mr. Alderney. How can I possibly be an heiress and not know anything about it?"

"I wouldn't exactly call you an heiress," Henry Alderney said cautiously. She was an engaging young woman, with her untidy brown hair, small, triangular-shaped face and long, jeans-clad legs.

"The estate of Henrietta Wynters," he began.

"Estate!" Jenny murmured, impressed. "But who was she? I've never even heard of her."

"Your great aunt. On your mother's side, I believe."

Jenny sighed. "I do wish I had known about her. I don't have any relatives left. Not since Dad died."

"Miss Wynters was very old when she died," the solicitor told her gently. "And she had long since severed all connection with her family."

"What was she like?"

Mr. Alderney hesitated. "Not an easy character," he said carefully. "I can't say I knew her at all well, but then I doubt anyone did. She was very strong-willed."

"How long is it since she died?"

"Almost a year."

"But it hasn't taken you all that time to find me!" Jenny exclaimed.

"No. The estate was left to her son during his lifetime and, after his death, to your mother or her surviving family."

"Her son! But I thought you said Miss Wynters?"

"I did. It was a great scandal in its day."

"My word, it must have been. Poor old Henrietta."

"Er—quite. The child, Albert, was born in 1916."

"And her family cast her off?"

"Not quite that. She was adequately provided for, but sent out of the immediate vicinity. However, as I said before, Miss Wynters had a mind of her own. She insisted on keeping the child instead of having him adopted. She returned to the district when the boy was a couple of years old, purchased Berry Cottage in Wyntersfield and lived there for the rest of her life. The popular theory was that her—ĕr—lover was killed in the Great War."

"But what about Albert? Didn't he have any family?"

"He never married. Albert died abroad some three months ago. And that was when I had to start searching for you, young lady."

"Your letter went to three different addresses before I got it. I had to give up our flat when Dad died, two years ago. I suppose there aren't any other Wynters around?"

"I'm afraid not," Mr. Alderney said regretfully. She looked so wistful that he was sorry to disappoint her. "Albert was the last survivor. They were quite a great family in the Wyntersfield area in their day, but the family has died out, the big house is gone, and most of the money has disappeared."

"That's a pity, especially if the cottage needs repairs. I don't suppose I will be able to afford it, unless I can do it myself."

"There might be a couple of hundred pounds," Mr. Alderney said cautiously. "However, as far as the cottage is concerned, I expect you will want to sell it."

"I'm not so sure about that," Jenny said. "I mean, it's family property."

"Well, if you do decide to sell, I have a purchaser for you," Mr. Alderney said.

"I couldn't make up my mind one way or the other until I've seen the place. Can we keep him dangling until I've looked it over?"

"Oh, certainly. I ought to tell you," he said, "that the person who wants to buy Berry Cottage is my own son, Geoffrey. He would, of course, pay the full market price; I'd insist on an independent valuation, so there would be no question of your losing on the deal."

"If I decided to sell, that is."

"Geoffrey, I should warn you, has quite made up his mind that you will. He's a doctor and practices in Wyntersfield. He lives in the house next door."

Jenny stood up. "He shall have first chance if I do," she promised. "I might as well go straight there now. Have you got the key, Mr. Alderney?"

"Well, no, not here. As a matter of fact, Geoffrey has the keys. I believe Mrs. Wantage, the woman who looks after him, has been in the habit of looking in to check that everything is all right. She has lived in the village all her life, and is perfectly trustworthy."

"It sounds very sensible," Jenny said lightly. "I'll get the keys from your son or this Mrs. Wantage then. Can you give me directions for getting there? I've got my bike outside."

"A bicycle!" Mr. Alderney exclaimed, startled. "You didn't come down from London on that?"

Jenny laughed. "It's a motorcycle. I ride it everywhere, but I thought you might be a bit surprised if I walked in on you in a crash helmet, so I parked my gear with your secretary."

Mr. Alderney pulled himself together. "I'm sure it's a very convenient form of transport," he agreed politely, and proceeded to give her directions.

He saw her out, and watched with a twinkle in his eye as she zipped herself into a heavy leather jacket and buckled on a bright yellow crash helmet that somehow only emphasized her youthful fragility.

He wondered what Geoffrey would make of her,

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and frowned at the thought of his son! It was a mystery how such a likable boy could have turned into the humorless automaton he appeared to have become. He worked too hard, of course, and he had suffered a distressing bereavement a few years back when his fiancée had been killed in an auto accident, but it seemed he ought to have recovered from that by this time.

Jenny had found the village and Haggers Lane without difficulty. She stopped the motorcycle and looked at a group of four cottages standing alone. The houses at either end were noticeably larger than the other two. The first of the larger houses had a brass plate on the gatepost with "Dr. G.D. Alderney, M.D., Ch.B.," inscribed on it. The adjoining cottage must be hers. She decided to look at the outside before asking for the key. So she opened the gate and stepped inside. There was a long, narrow front garden, and a straight path leading up to the front door.

She was surprised to see that the door was standing open, but then perhaps the housekeeper from next door was doing a tour of inspection.

She stepped inside the door and called, "Hello! Is anyone there?"

There was no response, but as she stood in the hallway she could hear voices overhead. She went to the foot of the stairs. Then, with fatal clarity, a woman's voice came floating down: "The location is ideal, of course, but the place needs an awful lot done to it. I simply couldn't live with that antiquated bathroom. Could you afford to have it remodeled for me, Geoffrey?"

"I might," a man's voice replied. "As long as this woman who owns it doesn't get an inflated idea of its value. It certainly isn't worth a great deal, Wanda. Let's go down and look at the dispensary."

By the time they descended the stairs, Jenny was ready for them, her yellow helmet swinging from her fingers, a dangerous sparkle in her eyes. "Good morning," she said with deceptive politeness. "There seem to be an awful lot of people in my house. Have you been running guided tours, Dr. Alderney? You are Dr. Alderney, I suppose?"

The man who had led the way down the stairs came to an abrupt halt. He stared at her, his face slowly reddening. "Yes, I'm Geoffrey Alderney. Who are you?"

"Jenny Bertram. The owner—or so your father told me this morning."

He came the rest of the way down the stairs, his eyes still fixed on her face. He was a tall man, in his late twenties, with a thin face and straight dark hair, badly cut and falling forward over his forehead. It was not a face that gave anything away, but it was full of contradictions: the hardness of his eyes was curiously offset by a certain sensitivity about his mouth.

At the moment, Geoffrey was suffering from an unusual awareness of being in the wrong. He knew he had no right to invite a prospective tenant to inspect Berry Cottage. The child owner was entitled to an apology and he did not wish to antagonize her, since he very much wished to buy the cottage. "I really do apologize. I had no right to come in here. I can only hope you will forgive me," he said.

"I probably will," Jenny said cheerfully, her first indignation beginning to subside in the face of this handsome apology.

Unfortunately, the young woman who had followed the doctor down the stairs was not so conciliatory. "We've done no harm, Miss—er—Bertram," she said briskly. "Just a preliminary look round. It's something you have to put up with when you have property to sell."

Geoffrey said nothing, aware that Jenny had stiffened again.

"It's not decided yet that this property is for sale," she pointed out.

"Oh, but surely . . ."

"Miss Bertram must be allowed to make up her own mind," Geoffrey intervened. He turned to Jenny. "Perhaps I should explain," he said. "We have no pharmacy in the village, which can be very inconvenient. Wanda—Mrs. Petrie—is a qualified pharmacist.She's willing to live here and turn the downstairs front room into a dispensary for me. It would be a very great boon to my patients, especially the older ones."

"I see." Jenny did not look particularly impressed. "And who is your other friend?"

"Bob Prestow, a surveyor."

Jenny's attention turned to the other young man, who looked exceedingly uncomfortable.

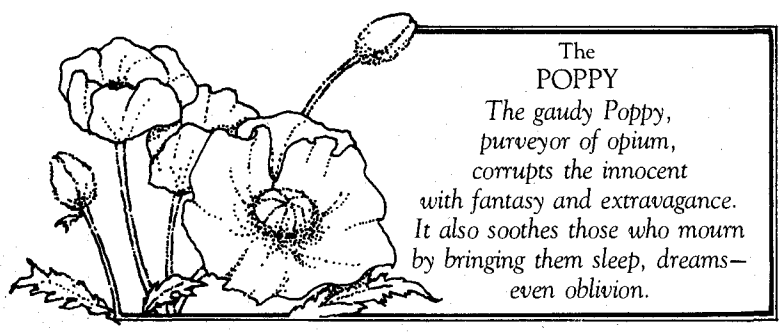
"Rather strange conduct, isn't it, Mr. Prestow?" she asked. "Coming into houses without permission?"

"If it's any comfort to you, I could cheerfully sink through the floor," Bob said ruefully.

Jenny felt herself weakening. She turned to Geoffrey. "You were planning to have the place properly inspected? And to get a written report?"

"Well . . . yes."

"Then I suggest we let Mr. Prestow complete his work, we share his fee and I have a copy of his report. When I've read it, I'll make



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up my mind whether or not to sell.'

"That's very reasonable, Miss Bertram," Geoffrey agreed.

After she saw them out it did not take Jenny long to explore the little cottage. It was simplicity itself: downstairs there was a livingroom, a kitchen and what had once been a scullery, but was now a bathroom; upstairs there were just two bedrooms. All the rooms were small, and in dire need of decoration. The furniture was heavy, dark, and old. The place was, to Jenny's eyes, depressing, but it had possibilities.

The front bedroom must have been Henrietta's. On a small circular table by the side of the bed was one photograph, in an ornate silver frame. As Jenny stretched out a hand to pick it up she realized that the glass had been smashed and the picture had been slashed across twice with some sharp instrument. She drew back her hand sharply, staring at the picture with distaste.

It was a head and shoulders of a man, taken some years previously from the style of his clothes and hair. Presumably, this was Albert. It was a dark-skinned, heavy-jowled face with thick eyebrows, a quantity of very dark hair, sensual lips, and large dark eyes with a curiously opaque look about them. Who could have stabbed so viciously at this secretive, self-indulgent face? His mother? Surely not! Jenny realized there were still fragments of glass scattered on the table. A recent occurrence then, and therefore an accident. It was a relief to be able to think this.

Downstairs, the livingroom had a fireplace and walls that were covered in faded blue paper, and the curtains were an even more faded blue velvet. There was a shabby sofa, two worn armchairs and a badly scuffed carpet.

In the kitchen, Jenny sat down to consider her situation. She was currently sharing a large flat in Earls Court with three other girls and working in a big insurance company. It was the only job she had ever had, going to it straight from her secretarial course; she had been in it nearly a year, and it was quite well paid, but dull.

As for Sandra and June and Betty, she had grown curiously disenchanted with her flatmates in the last few months. For one thing, she felt herself to be considerably more mature than they were.

Jenny had been left motherless at the age of twelve and, after a grim eighteen months in the hands of an incompetent housekeeper, had asserted that she could do the job better herself. Her father, easy-going and too harassed to think clearly, had allowed her to have her way. With the help of a woman who came in twice a week, Jenny coped.

Come live with me. and be my love:
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys. groves. hills. and fields.
Woods or steepy mountains yields.

Christopher Marlowe
The Passionate Shepherd to his Love

Two years later she had become a very pretty girl with an attractive personality to match, forthright, and honest; her only fault was a tendency to speak her mind too openly. Jim Bertram trusted that tact would come with age and he had begun to take a tentative interest in one of his women colleagues. By the time Jenny was seventeen and announced that she was leaving school and taking a secretarial course, her father had married his Maria and had flown off to Spain with her. The honeymoon plane had crashed and Jim and Maria were both killed.

For Jenny it was the end of an era. The flat had to be given up. There had been enough money to keep her for a year, boarding with the family of one of her school friends, while she attended secretarial college. Then, at the age of eighteen she had launched herself on the world, fixed herself up with a job in London and replied to an advertisement for an extra girl to share a flat. At first, it was a new adventure but she had begun to realize how little she had in common with her flatmates and had longed to be on her own. The cottage might be the answer, but how was she going to like living in the country? And would she be able to find work?

These were problems which required deeper thought. For the moment, all she had to decide was whether she liked the cottage well enough to live in it if it proved feasible. She unlocked the kitchen door and let herself out into the back garden. It was not as large as the front garden and was separated from the property on either side by low brick walls. The left-hand garden was also hidden by the side of a shed built against the wall, while the far larger garden of the doctor's house was open to view.

Beyond the end of the garden was an open field with a horse in it. Jenny wandered down the narrow stone path and stood looking out over the field. There were birds making a cheerful chirping noise, and farther away a skylark; she could hear two children call to one another, and there was a tractor in a field somewhere. To Jenny it all seemed very peaceful.

She became aware that someone was watching her, and turned around. In the garden on her left an elderly man was looking at her curiously. Jenny wished him a good morning and he nodded.

"I was just having a look round," she explained.

He stuck his spade in the ground and came to the wall dividing their gardens. "You'll be Miss Henry's relation?" he inquired. "The one that's come into the property?"

"I'm her great-niece, Jenny Bertram. If you mean Miss Wynters?"

The old man held out his hand. "Mick Cross," he said. "Very pleased to meet you, I'm sure. You going to come live here?"

"I don't know," Jenny said. "I haven't had time to make up my mind."

"Well, it'd be nice to have you. It's been a bit melancholy, having an empty house next door. I've been keeping the garden tidy for you."

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"Oh, I thought someone must have been working on it."

"Didn't want your weeds swamping my own place. I do the doctor's as well. Want me to keep on?"

"Yes, please. But if I move in, I might try it myself—though I don't know much about gardening."

A thought suddenly struck her. "I ought to pay you," she said hesitantly.

Mick snorted. "Have I asked for payment? No! I've not done more'n turn over your little patch and keep the grass cut. One thing though, I had a few seeds to spare and I put in a row or two of cabbages. They're mine!"

He glared at her fiercely, and Jenny hastened to agree.

"Who lives on the other side of you?" she asked then.

"Mr. and Mrs. Goodson. They're strangers, only been here two years or so. They've got a boy called Jimmy, started school last September. Not a bad kid, but I'd thank him to keep his ball his side of the wall."

"I suppose I'd be a stranger too, if I came to live here," Jenny said with a hint of regret. "How long does it take to be accepted, Mr. Cross?"

"Well, you being Family, it's a bit different. There are those of us left who remember the old days, when the Hall was still standing and the Wynters still living there. I'm nigh on seventy-three . . ."

"You certainly don't look it," Jenny put in.

"Well, I put it down to the open-air life. I was a gardener's boy up at the Hall from the age of ten. There was four gardeners in those days. Mr. Hodges, he was head gardener, then there was Tom Barrow, Clem Marshall and Dick Geary, and me running round after them, learning the trade. That was at the beginning of the Great War, mind you. By the end there was just Mr. Hodges and me, all the others were in the Army. Tom and Clem were killed. Dick Geary, he came back all right, he was always one to fall on his feet. Nothing ever touched him, barring some old Belgian farmer holding a shotgun to his head and getting him married off to his daughter. Dick was always one for the girls, but he met his match there—and served him right too. But having a family to support he needed a bit more money than there was to be made as a gardener, so he never worked up at the Hall no more after he came back."

"If you were around during the Great War, you must have been there when Albert was born."

"I was that. Mind you, it was hushed up at first. Miss Henry was packed off to stay with relations. Of course, there was talk, but it wasn't until she came back with a two-year-old boy in tow that we knew for certain."

"Who was Albert's father?"

"We never knew. No, not one of us. It beats me to this day."

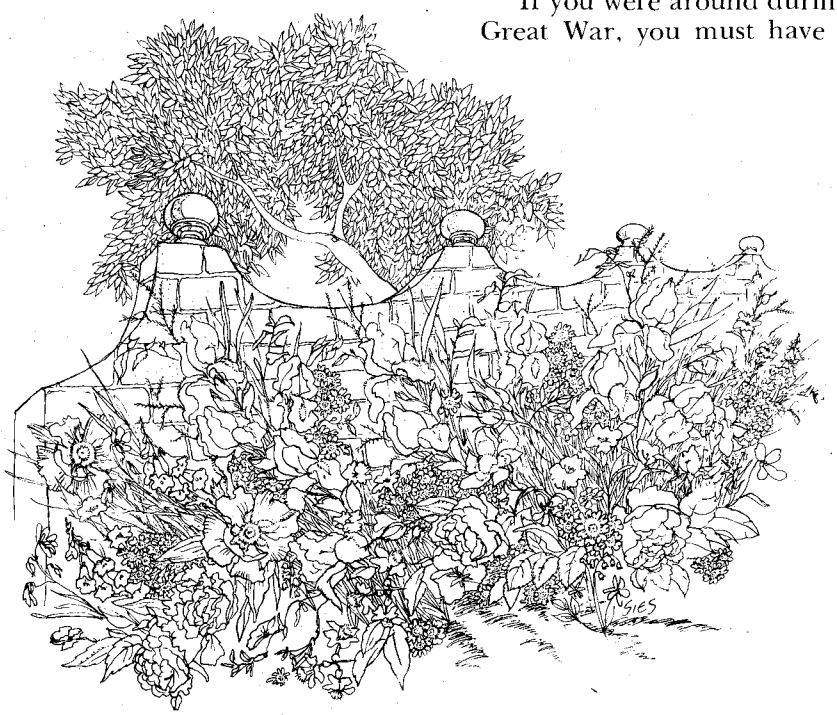
"Even after living next door to her all these years?"

"Miss Henry never forgot who she was. I was always 'Cross' to her and she was always 'Miss Henry' to me."

It was a fascinating talk, but Jenny had to get back. Abruptly she changed the subject. "Could I get a job if I moved down here?"

"Not in the village," Mick answered regretfully. "But there's plenty of offices in Bardenford. I've got this week's local paper inside. You can have it if you like; I've seen all I want of it."

Jenny accepted eagerly and was cheered to find when she looked through the Situations Vacant that there were several possibilities. Already she was beginning to look on the little cottage as her future home.



It was late in May before Jenny moved into Berry Cottage. The outcome had never really been in doubt, although she pretended that she was weighing up the arguments for and against her move.

Geoffrey Alderney accepted her decision with ill grace. The whim of a scatter-brained girl had frustrated his attempt to provide a service for the good of the village. He forgot his normal reserve and remarked bitterly to his housekeeper, "I'm sorry to say we shall soon have a new neighbor, Mrs. Wantage. Miss Bertram has refused my offer for the cottage and will be moving in herself."

"It isn't right!" she burst out. "Who does she think she is, a perfect stranger, coming here and putting us all out?"

Her vehemence softened Geoffrey's own animosity and he replied, "Well, to be fair, it's hardly her fault that the cottage was left

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to her."

"You'll not tell me it wasn't known there was property to come when Miss Henry died. Sly she'll be, no doubt about it."

The conversation left Geoffrey feeling surprised and uncomfortably aware of how unfair it was that Jenny's reception in the village should be prejudiced at the outset by the knowledge of his disappointment.

Jenny herself accepted Mrs. Wantage's hostility philosophically. She tried to strike up a conversation with her on one occasion, but received nothing in reply to her greeting but a blank stare.

"Is Mrs. Wantage deaf?" she asked Mick Cross.

"Lizzie Wantage? Not her! She could hear a mouse in felt slippers running over cotton-wool. What makes you ask?"

"Oh, I spoke to her and she didn't answer. I thought perhaps she hadn't heard me."

"She heard you all right. Lizzie's got a bee in her bonnet about you and this cottage. She's not one to speak her mind in public as a rule, but she's spread it all over the village how unfair it is—and that the doctor agrees with her. But, it'll blow over," Mick assured her cheerfully. "No one pays much heed to Lizzie anyway. She's a funny woman, and so was her mother before her."

"Why, what was wrong with her mother?"

"There was nothing wrong with her. But she was foreign. Remember I told you about old Dick Geary marrying that foreign girl? Well, that was Lizzie Wantage's mother."

Jenny was fascinated by Mick's revelations, but her chores called her, and she reluctantly cut the conversation short.

"How's it going?" Mick asked.

"Not too badly, but I can't get down to any real decorating until I move in."

"When's that going to be?"

"The Bank Holiday weekend, so I'll have an extra day to get straight before I start work in Bardenford on the Tuesday."

"Got yourself a job, then?"

"Yes, quite a good one." Jenny chuckled. "In Bob Prestow's office, in fact." The job had been the factor which had tipped the balance in favor of Jenny's decision to live in Wyntersfield.

It was an easy move, because Jenny had few possessions. What was more difficult was the adjustment from crowded flat life to a solitary existence in a cottage. On her first night alone, she bolted the front and back doors as a sensible precaution before going up to Henrietta's bedroom.

The room looked more stark and bare than she remembered it. Suddenly, as she looked down at the bare surface of the dressing-table, it struck her what was different. The silver-backed brushes and mirror were missing. She looked in the drawers but found nothing.

It was a loss that Jenny could sustain with equanimity, since she had not particularly admired their ponderous ornateness, but it was odd; Mr. Alderney had given her the impression that all the contents of the cottage belonged to her. She would have to mention it the next time she saw him.

Next day, Sunday, she was woken by the noise of the milkman delivering the pint of milk she had ordered. It was time to get up and carry on with the work of washing, painting and decorating which she had already begun.

It was a minor disaster when she opened the front door to take in her milk and found the bottle smashed on the doorstep. Quite apart from the mess, it meant black coffee for breakfast, and presumably no milk for the rest of the day. No handy corner shops in this quiet Sussex neighborhood.

She was sweeping up the glass, and wondering how one bottle could have managed to spread itself so far, when a small voice announced conversationally, "Your milk got broke."

It was the little boy from the house at the other end of the row.

"It certainly did," Jenny agreed ruefully. "I can't think how such an accident could have happened."

"It was a snake," young Jimmy told her earnestly. "It crawled out of the hedge and broke your milk bottle then crawled back."

Jenny looked round nervously. "Are you sure?"

"A brown snake with red eyes," he asserted.

Jenny's belief in the snake subsided rapidly. "If I catch any snakes in my garden I shall bash them on the head, put them in a sack and throw them in the river," she announced with cheerful exaggeration.

Jimmy appeared to approve. "Only it's gone back into Dr. Alderney's garden," he pointed out regretfully. "You can have some of our milk, I 'spect. I'll ask Mum."

Unfortunately, there were no friendly neighbors around when Jenny got up the following morning and found her milk bottle smashed for the second time.

"Darn that snake," she muttered venomously as she cleared up the mess. She glanced distractedly at her watch. It was just as well this was a holiday; she could not afford these mishaps on a workday.

She had decided to make the livingroom her first target, and had spent a hard two days' work on it. Now she contemplated her handiwork with pardonable pride. She had managed to get all the furniture out, and had rolled up the carpet. That was due for a good beating outside. Since she could not afford to replace either the carpet or the slipcovers, Jenny had sensibly decided to make do for the time being and gear her color scheme to their faded blues and pinks. The old wallpaper had given the room a cheerless aspect, so she had painted over it in a soft pale pink. The ceiling was newly whitened, and today she planned to paint the remaining woodwork in white, clean the carpet, and wash the slipcovers.

It was backbreaking work and the covers could only be washed in the bath. The sofa cover proved particularly difficult to handle, until Jenny, in despair, rolled up her jeans to the knee, got into the bath and walked up and down in the soapy water, trampling her washing under foot.

(Continued on page 74)

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stand still and the world will move

I thought Mr. Fuller was blind behind his glasses, but he could see more than I dared to find out.

A short story by Alida Baxter

I was laying to rest a passed-over love affair, and I was just about to pour myself a glass of wine and listen to my memory when Mr. Fuller upstairs switched his television on.

It is impossible to reach any fundamental decision about the delicacy of relationships or life's brusque and transient nature once dear, slightly deaf Mr. Fuller has switched on his television set.

He and I sometimes have tea or a nightcap together. We met one evening three years ago, when all my lights went out. I'd just moved in and I had no matches. So I went knocking on my new neighbors' front doors, and Mr. Fuller's front door was the first.

Since then we often had a chat over a cup of coffee, and he has taught me not to overload plugs and how to behave with fuse wire. He is rather retiring. It took him months and months to volunteer his first name, Harold, which I have never dared to use, and even longer to explain what he does during the day, for a living. Mr. Fuller deals in futures. When he told me, I choked—the coffee was very hot. For a moment, I thought he meant crystal gazing and horoscopes, but it's something to do with the stock exchange, and I must say Mr. Fuller looks much more like an insurance man than an astrologer. He wears a suit, a tie, and a topcoat. His polished shoes are blinding and his rimless glasses are very bright.

I have made Mr. Fuller my confidant; I have told him everything and in return for giving me his shy hospitality and his fuse wire and his quiet attention, I have given him every chipped detail of my less-than-satisfactory love life. I have told him about the young man for whom I played the role of older woman and the middle-aged man for whom I played the role of a young girl. I've told him about men looking for mothers, not wives, who filled my weekdays with endless lunches and my weekends alone with endless silences; about divorced men who wanted too quickly another housekeeper, and the elegant, perennial bachelors who wanted only a hostess.

I was looking in my wineglass when there was a knock at the front door, and just for a minute I hoped . . . But when I went to answer it, there was Mr. Fuller—in his shiny shoes and his well-brushed suit and his rimless glasses.

"Would you like to come up for the mystery movie?" he asked politely. Mr. Fuller gets better reception on that channel than I do.

"Yes," I said. "Thanks, I'd love to. I'll be up later." And when I'd shut the door I cursed, because my hands were shaking and I could hear my own heart beat. If only I didn't still think—but I do. And how long is it now, anyway? Five weeks?

I went up to Mr. Fuller's a little early, and we sat and had tea together. When he asked me what I was doing now, I said I was just thinking about things.

"No, um, I was referring to—the rabbits."

"Oh," I said, taking a chocolate cookie. "No, I've finished the children's books, uh, the white rabbits. I'm illustrating teenage adventure stuff now. Masses of dark space, some eerie trees, and a whole lot of streets."

Mr. Fuller wrinkled his nose. He does that very expressively—or perhaps it's the slip of his glasses. "Yours must be very *lonely*, introspective work."

He has said this to me before. He has said it when I've gone up to his place and eaten a box of cookies, in silence, and had swollen eyes.

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"No," I said. "It's not lonely. Loads of people work by themselves, and I work alone, that's all."

His nose moved, but I wouldn't watch it, and then the beginning theme song of the mystery came on and the sound shook the set.

Afterward, Mr. Fuller made whisky and hot milk, with a spoonful of honey. It was very comforting.

"You were mentioning . . ." He gestured. "Thinking about things . . .?"

"Yes. You know . . ." I couldn't seem to go on. And I dunked a cookie in the mug of milk, with a splash, defiantly.

He edged back in his chair. "Sometimes thinking about that sort of thing is better done when it is all over."

"But it is all over!"

"Not inside you, my dear—if you'll forgive . . . That's where it isn't all over yet."

If I could have done what I wanted, I would have thrown myself into the hot milk and drowned. Or I would have asked him, like a child, to please, please take away the pain.

"This time it's very bad," I whispered.

"Yes." He nodded. "I can see that."

"It was very good, or I thought it was, Mr. Fuller.

"And now it's stopped, so I feel very bad."

We stared at our knees for a minute, and then he said, "Would you like some more whisky?" and I said, "Yes, please."

When I was more composed, and I was holding my mug with both hands, I said, "I don't think I can do it—you know, pick myself up again."

"You have, um . . ." He gave a little nervous cough. "You are doing—it takes a while, but you are doing it."

"This time, yes, I suppose so, but I won't be able to next time."

His glasses tilted. I saw the slight bewilderment. "I don't . . ."

"You see, it doesn't get better, it doesn't get easier, it just gets worse, and now it's gotten so bad that even breathing hurts and I can't do it again. I know I can't. It'll happen, you see, it will, it'll happen again, because they always—all of them—it always breaks up in the end."

Mr. Fuller rose, and took the shaking mug from me. It was empty again.

"It happens because you are what you are, of course.

"It happens because you are you. Oh—I didn't intend—I didn't mean to preach . . . Here, have another." The whisky glowed warmly like liquid teak. "I merely meant . . ."

"I know what you meant, and you didn't need to tell me. Don't you understand that's the worst part of it all, knowing that what's wrong is *me!*"

Mr. Fuller smoothed his thin hair and took off his glasses. His eyes were wet, gray pebbles, and when he spoke his voice seemed so much older. "My dear," he said, and shook his head, and sat down. He began polishing his lenses slowly with a large, very clean handkerchief. "Don't you realize that in this neglectful world you are the only good neighbor? That this life is like a parched garden and you are the only flower it it? That merely to be with you and watch the light on your hair and the shape of your lips is pure happiness? That your voice is soft and loving, and when you are happy you sing while you cook—I can hear you singing snatches of songs if I stand very quietly in my own kitchen. And when you are sad, I can hear you sobbing in your bedroom, and I would die to save you from unhappiness. I turn up my television in case you . . ." He blinked.

"All the men, all of those who have come and gone from this place—and I have watched them, up there, from my window—they have all radiated joy at having found you. But not one of them has been able to give you anything. And they have all been baffled, in the time that they have known you, and overwhelmed by your unalloyed love in its vast totality. You have embarrassed them, my dear. There is nothing so embarrassing as complete generosity. You overflow with love, you swamp them with attention, you require nothing of them—and they are humiliated beyond words. Because they cannot match you. So they run away from their embarrassment and their inadequacy."

The mug shuddered in my sweaty hands, and I saw that it was empty.

"The only way to prevent what keeps happening to you would be to change yourself—haven't you ever wondered why you don't change?"

"Yes," I whispered. "And I try, but I can't seem to."

"You can't change," he said, "because you are completely perfect."

There was a silence. Mr. Fuller blew his nose. And then he replaced his glasses. And then he said, "Now, are you feeling better?"

"Yes," I said. I was, and I was feeling tipsy.

"Do you feel well enough to wash your hair tomorrow?"

I stared at him. What with one thing and another, and a lot of whisky, I thought he might have gone mad.

"You will want to look your best because you will be going to the theater. My nephew will be taking you."

"Will he?"

"Yes. I intend to become ill. Certainly far too ill for the theater. My nephew has two tickets and he was going to take me."

(Continued on page 69)

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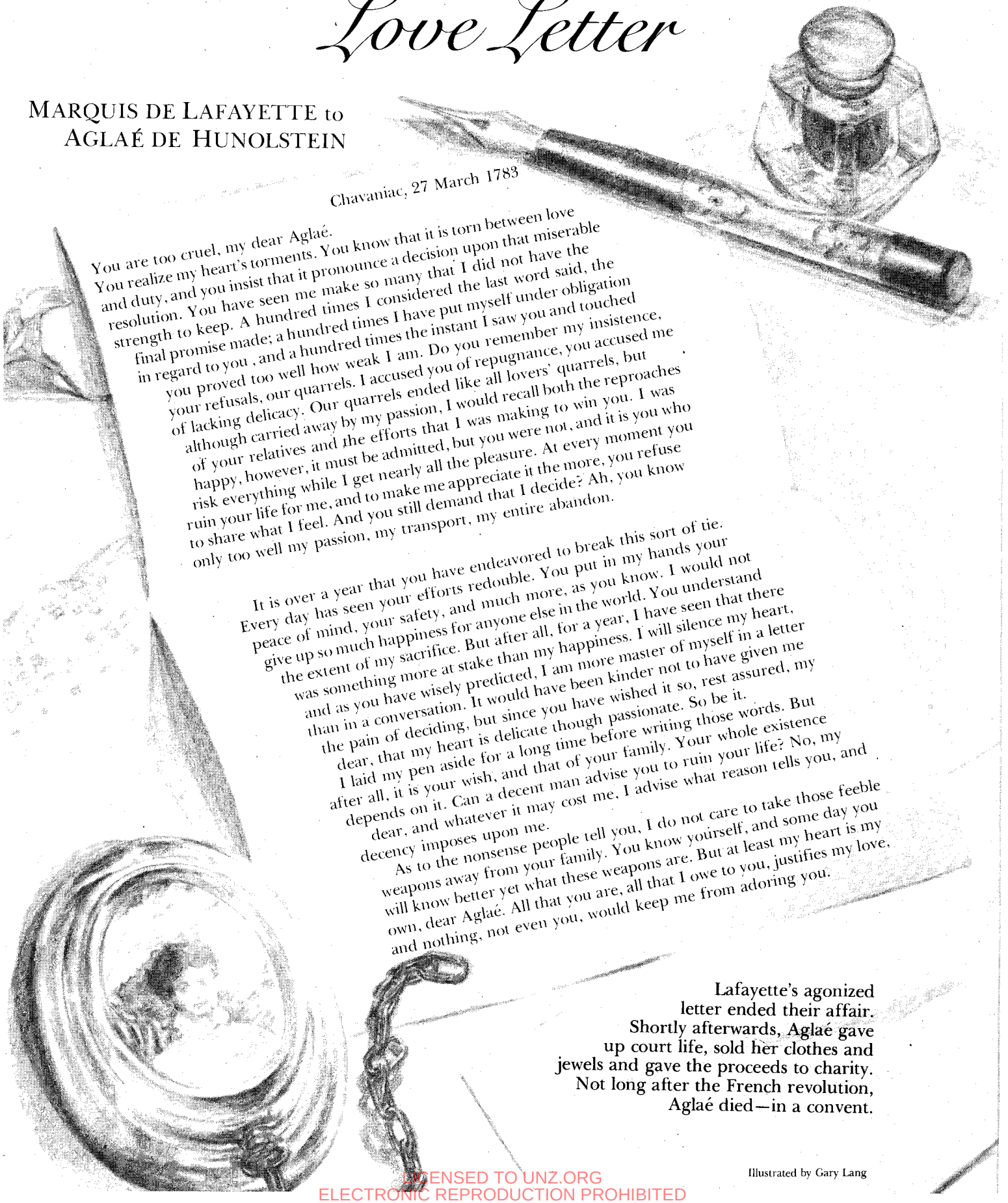
A Cameo Love Letter

MARQUIS DE LAFAYETTE to AGLAÉ DE HUNOLSTEIN



Chavaniac, 27 March 1783

You are too cruel, my dear Aglaé.
You realize my heart's torments. You know that it is torn between love and duty, and you insist that it pronounce a decision upon that miserable resolution. You have seen me make so many that I did not have the strength to keep. A hundred times I considered the last word said, the final promise made; a hundred times I have put myself under obligation in regard to you , and a hundred times the instant I saw you and touched you proved too well how weak I am. Do you remember my insistence, your refusals, our quarrels. I accused you of repugnance, you accused me of lacking delicacy. Our quarrels ended like all lovers' quarrels, but although carried away by my passion, I would recall both the reproaches of your relatives and the efforts that I was making to win you. I was happy, however, it must be admitted, but you were not, and it is you who risk everything while I get nearly all the pleasure. At every moment you ruin your life for me, and to make me appreciate it the more, you refuse to share what I feel. And you still demand that I decide? Ah, you know only too well my passion, my transport, my entire abandon.

It is over a year that you have endeavored to break this sort of tie. Every day has seen your efforts redouble. You put in my hands your peace of mind, your safety, and much more, as you know. I would not give up so much happiness for anyone else in the world. You understand the extent of my sacrifice. But after all, for a year, I have seen that there was something more at stake than my happiness. I will silence my heart, and as you have wisely predicted, I am more master of myself in a letter than in a conversation. It would have been kinder not to have given me the pain of deciding, but since you have wished it so, rest assured, my dear, that my heart is delicate though passionate. So be it.
I laid my pen aside for a long time before writing those words. But after all, it is your wish, and that of your family. Your whole existence depends on it. Can a decent man advise you to ruin your life? No, my dear, and whatever it may cost me, I advise what reason tells you, and decency imposes upon me.
As to the nonsense people tell you, I do not care to take those feeble weapons away from your family. You know yourself, and some day you will know better yet what these weapons are. But at least my heart is my own, dear Aglaé. All that you are, all that I owe to you, justifies my love, and nothing, not even you, would keep me from adoring you.

Lafayette's agonized letter ended their affair. Shortly afterwards, Aglaé gave up court life, sold her clothes and jewels and gave the proceeds to charity. Not long after the French revolution, Aglaé died—in a convent.

Illustrated by Gary Lang

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Abby

Illustrated by Leora M. Sies

BY
FRANCINE RIVERS

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A
CAMEO
NOVEL

The carpetbag grew heavier with each step. My mouth tasted of dust. Pausing alongside the dirt road, I dropped the bag and pulled a handkerchief from my drawstring purse. Taking a deep breath, I dabbed at the perspiration beading my forehead.

I wondered if the stage had been repaired yet. At the rate I was going it might come along and pick me up before I was able to reach my destination. Ten miles had not seemed like such a long walk this morning. But it had been cooler then, and the excitement of reaching the end of my journey had been great.

Looking up, I was greeted by a cloudless blue sky. Around me, the hills were golden, occasionally relieved by the green leaves of huge oaks and other native trees. Not far away was a line of imported eucalyptus trees standing like straight-backed sentinels. There were no flowers about, but the stagecoach driver had assured me that these same dry-grassed hills were covered in spring with golden poppies, blue lupins, sunburst yellow mustard flowers, and red paintbrushes.

I must have already covered six or seven miles, but I had no way of really knowing. Distances in this hot, dry world of great spaces and few people did not seem the same as in Boston. Perhaps if I had not run into so many delays before the stage had broken down I would not have been so impulsive and decided to hike the last ten miles. The worst delay had come in Sacramento where my trunk with all my books and teaching materials had been found missing. Central Pacific personnel had not been alarmed, but it had taken three days to locate it. As soon as my wayward trunk arrived in Sacramento, I boarded the next train to Oakland. Once there, I intended to take the train on to Sycamore Hill. However, that train had already departed, and the next would not go for another three days. I could not afford the board for the local hotel and the station manager had mentioned an old stage line that was still in business.

Forty miles lay between Oakland and Sycamore Hill, so I decided to take a chance and ride the disreputable stage. It broke down—not once but several times. The last time, the coach had lost a wheel that the driver said would take several hours to repair. So I had decided to walk with the assurance that my trunk would be dropped off at the general store in Sycamore Hill.

In spite of all the mishaps, I was filled with trembling excitement. Only at odd moments had I felt real resentment at the Haversalls, my adoptive parents. I had lived under their roof for eighteen years and had never really known them. It was incredible to discover, after their deaths, that they had stolen the large inheritance I was never, ever, during their lifetime told belonged to me. I am not sure now whether it was a kindness on Bradford Dobson's part to tell me that it had existed. I suppose, as the Haversalls' solicitor and as my father's lawyer, it was clearly his duty to inform me. But I could not say I did not have moments of bitter resentment about my stolen inheritance. The worst moments were when I realized what a fool I had been to remain with the Haversalls and to literally act as their servant out of mistaken gratitude. How they must have laughed at me! So, at present, I had nothing but the very few dollars remaining from my father's fortune and ahead of me a position as a schoolteacher for a rural community.

I was so deep in thought that I failed to notice the gopher hole in front of me. Stumbling, I fell headlong onto the road. Only momentarily stunned, I stood up,quickly straightening my blouse and brushing down my skirt.

"Of all the ridiculous things to do," I mumbled to myself. Then I started to laugh, thinking of the picture I must have made. A voice behind me cut short my laughter.

"This is hardly a day to be out pleasure walking."

I whirled around to face a man sitting above me on a buckboard. His face and expression were shadowed beneath the rim of his hat. I noticed a clean white shirt covering a set of decidedly broad shoulders and brown pants that indicated long, well-muscled legs. His hands were relaxed on the reins, hands that were work-callused but clean, with neatly trimmed nails.

I felt even more disheveled beside the man's crispness, and a surge of unreasonable resentment stiffened my spine.

The stranger took off his hat and wiped his forehead with his forearm. He was young, not more than

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thirty-five, and attractive in a rugged, tanned sort of way. He had thick tawny hair, sun-streaked blond in the front. But it was his eyes that caught my immediate, if dismayed, attention. They were the bluest I had ever seen, and they were filled with laughter. I realized he had witnessed my ignominious pratfall.

"You could give a person some warning," I flared, "without sneaking up behind them and scaring them half to death."

There was the slightest narrowing of those blue eyes, but the smile changed to a wide grin that disclosed even, white teeth.

"Now, little lady," he drawled, scrutinizing me closely, "you aren't going to pretend it was my presence that brought on that little dance routine you just did."

Snatching up the carpetbag I had dropped, I began to march down the dusty road again. I did not hear the buckboard moving and chanced a quick look over my shoulder. The man was watching me with an enigmatic expression. I jerked my head back around, afraid that if I did not watch where I was going I would stumble into another gopher hole.

I heard the buckboard move and draw up next to me.

"Why don't you sit down and take a load off your feet? You look as though you've walked for miles."

I knew I looked a mess, but I did not appreciate him telling me so. "Thank you for your kind observations," I said without slowing my pace. I could feel his eyes on my face and hoped he blamed the heat for the rush of color. He flicked the reins again, guiding his two sorrels toward the side of the road. He kept close behind me, herding me like an unruly cow until I was pressed off the road.

"What are you doing?" I gasped, just managing to get out of the way of a large hoof.

"How long have you been walking?"

"Since eight this morning." I paused. "Will you stop those animals before they walk all over me?"

"Happy to," the man grinned, setting the brake before jumping down to tower over me. I stepped back and stared warily at him.

"I've no intention of molesting you," he said softly. "I thought you might need a drink of water."

Escape, for the moment, was forgotten. He reached under the seat and pulled out a canteen.

I smiled. "Is that all you have? I was praying for a river."

He laughed. "Take it slow," he said as I gulped thirstily.

"Oh . . . that tastes so good," I breathed. "I think I've swallowed half the dust between Oakland and Sycamore Hill." I started to hand back the canteen and then realized I should wipe off the top. But with what? I looked down at my dusty skirt and the soiled handkerchief stuffed into my pocket.

Lean, hard fingers closed over mine. I released the canteen as though his touch burned. A smile touched his mouth as he raised the canteen and drank from it. There was something very intimate about that action and I felt my face tingling. He held out the canteen to me again. "Would you like another drink?" he asked, a faintly taunting glitter in his eyes.

"No . . . no, thank you," I replied.

"You're from Boston?"

"How did you know that?" I asked.

"Your accent. And other things . . ."

"Other things?"

"No one that I know of would walk dressed like that, carrying a carpetbag, without a canteen in the middle of August. Not if they were from around here. And not if they had any brains."

My mouth tightened though I saw the teasing light in his eyes. "I was eager to reach Sycamore Hill," I said coolly. "The stage from Oakland had already broken down twice before a wheel came off, and the repairs were expected to take quite a while. Ten miles didn't seem so long a few hours ago. Besides, it was mild enough this morning."

"It starts out cool," he agreed, "but it can end up hotter than hell in the afternoon." I flushed at his easy swearing.

"What's the matter?" he chuckled, though I suspected he knew very well.

"Not a thing."

"Boston through and through, aren't you?"

"What do you mean by that?" I demanded, piqued by his laughter.

"All prim and proper. A little earthy language brings sundown into your cheeks."

"I'm not as prim as I look," I flared, clutching my bag and turning away.

"Just a minute," he said quickly. "I'm sorry. I'll try not to tease you anymore. But I think you ought to sit down for a few minutes before you faint dead away. Your face is a little too red."

"I wish you would keep your observations to yourself, Mister . . . Mister . . ."

"Jordan Bennett," he supplied with a slight smile.

"Mr. Bennett," I finished, pulling my eyes determinedly away from his.

"Visiting or staying?"

"Pardon me?" I said blankly.

"Sycamore Hill. That is your destination, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"And?"

"I'm not sure," I hedged. "Are you . . . a local resident, Mr. Bennett?"

"No."

I waited, hoping for more information, but none was forthcoming. The silence was making me uncomfortable.

"Is it always this hot in the summer?" I asked inanely.

"No."

The man was determined to make me angry.

"How far is it to Sycamore Hill?"

"Two miles . . . and uphill all the way." He was grinning now, and I closed my eyes saying a silent prayer. It remained unanswered and I sighed heavily.

"Well?" he drawled.

"Well what?"

"Aren't you going to ask?" I knew he was laughing at me again.

"Ask you what?" I pretended obtuseness.

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"Are you always this stubborn?" he asked and shook his head. "I give in," he gave a dramatic sigh. "I must be the more curious of the two of us. What's your name, first off?" He sounded as though he had made up a list of questions, and I stiffened again.

"Abigail McFarland."

"Abigail." He tested the name on his tongue. "A nice, old-fashioned name, if a bit stiff," he decided, and then his eyes widened as some thought, obviously far from pleasant, entered his head.

"Good God! I think I know who you are!"

"You do?" I asked. "Why are you looking so thunderous?" I added, alarmed at the sudden change in his expression.

"You're the new schoolmarm, aren't you?" he accused.

"Well . . . yes," I admitted, utterly bewildered by his reaction to my occupation.

He swore beneath his breath. "I should have known," he muttered and then glared at me. Without another word he walked purposefully toward his buckboard.

He was going to leave me here, I realized with sudden astonishment. Without thinking, I jumped up and ran after him.

"Mr. Bennett . . . wait . . . please . . . May I . . . may I . . ."

"No!" he snapped. "If you're about to ask for a ride to town, forget it! The walk will teach you a lesson."

I tried for levity. "Well, I've learned my lesson."

"You'll learn a damn sight more when you reach town," he said, releasing the brake. His gaze was blistering.

"What do you mean?"

"I wouldn't want to ruin the surprise, Miss McFarland. And another thing. I'll take odds that you'll be running out of town by the end of the month."

"I'm not as soft as you seem to think I am," I said coolly.

"No?" His eyes dropped provocatively. Then he picked up the reins, not even wasting a backward glance on me.

I picked up my carpetbag and forced myself to start walking. It was an interminable two miles; I was furious and during the entire walk I could not stop thinking about Bennett's reaction to my occupation and his prophecy. It made me even more determined to succeed but it did nothing to make me feel comfortable about what might lie ahead in Sycamore Hill.

An hour and a half later, I walked into Sycamore Hill. A Yankee church stood at the base of the hill and off to the right I could see another church built contrastingly of adobe brick in the tradition of a Jesuit mission. On Main Street, tidy, modest houses, each with a rose garden, snuggled tightly against stores and businesses. English walnut, maple, and pine trees grew on the unpaved streets that shot out to the left and right of Main. On the corner of Silverton Street stood a fine, sturdy two-story boarding house with a small, neatly-printed vacancy sign in the front lace-curtained window. I hesitated and noted with interest the brilliantly overflowing window boxes. A sigh escaped me. Perhaps this pleasant house would be my new home. There was a vast difference between it and the spacious brownstone mansion in Boston. This one looked warm and hospitable. Perhaps here I could develop friendships and make a place for myself.

However, there was no time to daydream. It was nearly dusk, and I had yet to find Olmstead's General Store. Arrangements would have been made for my arrival, I was sure. Excitement overrode the pain of my ten-mile walk, and I moved more quickly down the quiet street.

Finally, I spotted a sign announcing the store. It was only two blocks from the church at the end of town. Parked neatly in front of the store was a loaded buckboard. I hesitated. Surely that odious man was not there waiting for me. Glancing around, however, I saw other buckboards. Feeling more sure of myself, I started forward and stepped into the store.

The first person I saw was Jordan Bennett. He was lounging

Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other.

Rainer Maria Rilke
Letters to a Young Poet

against the counter, laughing with a woman with pleasant features and long braided hair pinned in a crown on her head. I felt color flushing my face as Bennett flicked a glance in my direction and then ignored me. Never in my life had I despised anyone quite so much as I did him at that moment.

The woman Bennett was with gave him a playful slap on the hand and then raised her head to see me standing just inside the door. Her eyes took in my bedraggled appearance as she came around the counter. She smiled, if a bit curiously, and I forced a smile in return.

"May I help you?" the woman asked.

"Yes, I think so," I answered huskily, my throat parched and sore from thirst and swallowed dust. "May I speak with James Olmstead? I'm Abigail McFarland from Boston. He's expecting me, I believe."

Her eyes lighted with excitement and pleasure. "You're our new schoolteacher," she said brightly. "Oh, I'm so glad you've arrived safe and sound. Did you have a nice trip?" Her exuberance caught me a little off guard. She almost implied that I might have arrived other than well, but then I thought of the picture I must have made and smiled in spite of my discomfort.

"Yes. Everything went very well until the last few miles," I told her, casting a brief glance in Bennett's direction and meeting decidedly warning eyes. He straightened from the counter.

"Why don't you get Miss McFarland a cup of your good coffee, Emmy?" he suggested. "Our new schoolteacher looks badly in need of a drink of something."

I glared at him, then smiled at the woman again. "A glass of water would be very welcome," I admitted, expecting Bennett to laugh. He didn't.

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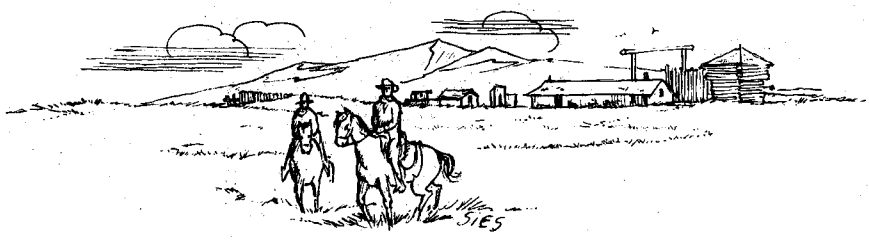

"Oh, yes, of course. Just listen to me rattling on like some magpie. I'm Emily Olmstead, Jim's wife," she said, extending her hand and shaking mine firmly. "This is Jordan Bennett, one of our most illustrious ranchers. You'll have his daughter, Linda, in your class. She's a dear . . . and as pretty as her mother."

I felt a hard lump drop into the pit of my stomach. I avoided looking at Jordan Bennett. Maybe he had disapproved of me because he didn't want anyone who looked like a scruffy ragamuffin teaching his daughter.

"I'll get you some water now and collect my husband on the way back." Emily Olmstead smiled and left the room.

I felt uncomfortable being alone with Jordan Bennett. Turning away, I pretended interest in the rows of canned goods. I heard him move behind me and stiffened.

"Did you enjoy your walk, Miss McFarland?"

I forced myself to answer evenly, "Even the last two miles, Mr. Bennett."

"I'm glad to hear it," he murmured. I could feel him watching me. "You were about to tell Emmy of our meeting on the road. Take my advice. Don't."

I turned to face him. "And why not, Mr. Bennett? Might it be embarrassing for you?"

His eyes narrowed slightly. "I don't embarrass easily."

"I suppose not. One does need a conscience first."

"Something you obviously think I lack," he said dryly. The corner of his mouth curved up. "Listen to me, my dear little Boston *grande dame*. The first thing you had better learn about being a schoolmarm is not to lounge under shade trees, sharing drinks and conversation with strange men."

His description of our brief encounter sounded scandalous. In embarrassment and rising indignation, I flushed red to the roots of my auburn hair.

"I was not lounging under a shade tree, and you know it, Mr. Bennett," I hissed furiously.

"From my vantage point you were. And the conversation begged a flirtation," he said, unmoved by my anger.

I stared at him in disbelief. "I don't flirt!" I said hotly.

He chuckled. "I find that encouraging," he drawled, leaning closer so that I had to arch back away from him. He smiled, his eyes conveying some message that my mind did not fully understand but my senses did. Bennett straightened again as though well aware of his effect on me. His voice became brisk.

"After all, Miss McFarland, there are certain things a town expects of its teacher . . . one being an untarnished reputation." The unfriendliness was back in his voice and expression.

I blanched. "There's nothing wrong with my reputation."

"Not yet, maybe. But a few indiscreet admissions on your part might change that, and you'd find yourself out of a job before you even got started."

"But nothing has happened that I'm embarrassed about," I replied hotly.

"People always prefer to see the worst. It makes their vicarious living more exciting," he said cynically. "They hear the facts . . . a lone girl on the road, lingering with a man," he said and raised his brows provocatively, his eyes moving to my mouth.

"You're vile!" I gasped. "And I don't believe you are the least concerned about *my* reputation."

His mouth tightened in impatience. "There's nothing that can damage my reputation at this point," he said coldly. "I've lived in these parts most of my life. People have already drawn their own conclusions about my questionable character."

In other words, anyone in town would believe anything he said about whatever defense I might present.

"Meaning you intend to put a different connotation on our meeting if I should choose to say anything about it. You're even worse than I first thought," I murmured, turning away. Bennett's hand swung me back forcibly. There was a ruthless determination in his hardened expression.

"Your intelligence isn't as high as I thought," he said acidly.

"You needn't be so insulting, Mr. Bennett," I snapped.

"Everything's been running just fine. I don't need a damn little schoolmarm around to complicate matters," he said, his eyes glittering. "Why the hell did you come to Sycamore Hill?"

This man was absolutely infuriating. "What do I have to do with anything you're involved in? As far as my reason for being here, this town evidently needs a teacher. And you, yourself, could do with some English lessons, Mr. Bennett. Or can you only promote your own idiocy by foul language?" Nothing he said made any sense to me.

"Why don't you take a little friendly advice, Miss McFarland? Go on back to Boston. For one thing, you'll make a lousy schoolteacher," he said, giving a blow to my already shaking ego. All the doubts I had voiced to Bradford Dobson when he had learned of this position came flooding back to haunt me.

"Are you losing your nerve already, Miss McFarland?"

"I will do my very best," I said. He watched my face as though searching for some indication of weakness.

"I've no doubt you will. You'll dig your own premature grave in that godforsaken schoolhouse. But things are going to be harrowing enough for you without my adding my two-bits' worth." With that disquieting comment, he turned and strode out of the store.

"Jim, this is Miss Abigail McFarland," Emily Olmstead said from behind me, drawing my attention away from Jordan Bennett who was already moving off down the street in his buckboard. I offered my hand to the bullish-looking man with a balding head and sharp brown eyes.

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," he greeted respectfully while looking me over with questioning intensity.

"I'm afraid I had to walk the last ten miles," I said to explain my state. "The stagecoach lost a wheel, you see . . ."

"We expected you to come by train."

"The train wasn't due to leave again for another three days. I was too excited to wait that long." My admission met with a moment's dead silence.

"It might have been wiser if you had, Miss McFarland—"

"Oh, Jim," Emily cut in. He gave her an impatient look.

"Is her room ready yet?" he asked abruptly and Emily flushed.

"I . . . I hadn't gotten around to going over there . . . yet," she said, and I sensed more than embarrassment in

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her admission.

"I'm sure my room is just fine," I tried to reassure Emily Olmstead.

"The school has been closed for over a year," Olmstead informed me. "Nobody has been in the place during that time."

"You see, we weren't able to find another teacher after—" Emily started to explain.

"You're lucky you didn't collapse on the road in this August heat, Miss McFarland," Olmstead interrupted, casting his wife a warning glance that she obviously understood. "It was over a hundred degrees out, by my guess."

The tingling of a bell stopped my racing thoughts, and a heavyset woman walked into the store. Dark, ferretlike eyes moved over me with avid curiousity.

"Berthamae," Emily greeted. Berthamae only treated Emily to a cursory glance, then continued to stare pointedly at me.

"Miss McFarland, this is Berthamae Poole," Olmstead said. "Miss McFarland is our new schoolteacher, Berthamae."

The woman's thick eyebrows shot up. "Well, it's high time," she said sharply before I could even extend my hand. "The town has done without a teacher long enough. That last one was a poor excuse for one—"

"I'm sure Miss McFarland isn't interested in the previous teacher's shortcomings," Olmstead cut in and again there was a quick exchange of glances, this time between Berthamae Poole and James Olmstead.

"Of course she is," the woman insisted. "She's got to live in that place. She should know about it."

"Did you want something or not, Bertie?" Emily asked.

"I came for dried lentils, onions, basil, yeast, and ten pounds of wheat flour," Berthamae answered, the previous subject ended.

"Then come right this way, if you please." Olmstead indicated another section of the store. Berthamae followed, chin up. Olmstead was talking fast, his voice very low.

"Don't pay any attention to her," Emily whispered close to my ear. "She prattles on just to hear herself talk. You will, of course, stay with us for dinner. Then we'll take you up to the schoolhouse." The prospect did not seem one to which Emily Olmstead looked forward.

"School opens the first week of September. That should give you enough time to get the schoolhouse in order," Olmstead was saying between mouthfuls of delicious beef stew.

"I'm afraid it's a mess," Emily said apologetically.

"After the last teacher resigned, some of the children got it in their heads to vandalize the place," Olmstead said.

"We might as well tell her who it was, Jim," Emily said. She supplied the answer before Olmstead had time to say anything. "It was those Poole boys. You met their mother this afternoon. Well, Sherman and Grant, her two sons, are little hellions."

"How old are they?" I asked Emily.

"Sherman is fourteen and Grant is twelve and a half. They're two years senior to our Andrew. He'll be eleven in April." Andrew was at a friend's for dinner.

"She'll have plenty of time to meet the children, Em. Bridle that tongue of yours so I can get on with our talk," Olmstead said.

"Yes, dear," she demurred, then began to clear away the dishes.

"As I was saying, Miss McFarland . . . the schoolhouse and yard could use some cleaning up. You will be responsible for that. The heavy repairs will be taken care of by some of the townsmen when they can spare the time."

"Are there many heavy repairs?" I asked dubiously.

"Two broken windows in front, a couple of smashed desks, a few leaks in the roof, and the back steps from your room need some work. Your quarters are in good condition."

The place sounded like a wreck.

"There are certain rules of conduct that must be maintained," Olmstead said.

"For the children?" I asked. I had expected to be able to decide on rules for the children without much interference from the school board.

"No, ma'am. For you."

"For me?" I could not keep the surprise out of my voice.

"Of course," he said. "You are an example for our children, and as such there are certain strict standards which you must keep."

I braced myself as he continued.

"You will be expected to attend church each Sunday and teach a class there under the authority of our excellent Reverend Jonah Hayes. Classes for the children will be from Monday through Friday from nine until three. The children have not had a teacher for over a year, so you will have to see that they make up for the lost time." That was a handicap I had not foreseen.

"How many children are there?"

"Thirty-four."

The task ahead of me seemed to grow with each word James Olmstead spoke. Thirty-four children. Lessons for all levels. Cleaning the schoolhouse and yard.

"If children have academic dificulties, you will, of course, be expected to tutor them after school hours. If any become sick, you will make up lessons for them to do at home.

"As for your own social conduct, you are not allowed to entertain men in your quarters, nor are you to be alone with a man for any reason other than school business, and then never after five in the afternoon."

"Are you serious, Mr. Olmstead?"

"Absolutely," he said, surprised that I should ask. "These are universal rules, Miss McFarland."

"They seem . . . archaic. I can assure you I have no intention of entertaining men in my quarters, but I am not even allowed to carry on a sociable conversation with a man except on school business?"

"That's correct. You will have as much social contact as you will need with the Mothers' League, the Women's Church Guild, and the local sewing circles.

"You are expected to attend all town meetings; however, you are not permitted to speak on any issue. You must remain neutral in all political conversations. As for subject matter in the classroom, limit your teaching to reading, writing, and arithmetic. Anything else is unnecessary frill. Now, about your dress."

I stiffened noticeably but Olmstead continued, unabated. "Your present outfit is appropriate if a bit untidy. Ankles, wrists, neck are to be covered at all times. You are permitted to wear browns, grays, black, white or deep green. Anything else you are not. No furbelows. No jewelry except perhaps a plain watch-pin. No ribbons, no fancy hairpins. Your hair is to be confined at all times."

"May I take it down when I go to bed?" I asked, unable to resist. Olmstead looked shocked.

"I'm sorry," I apologized meekly. I suddenly felt tired and depressed. I had thought I had escaped oppressive bondage, but apparently I had cast myself under the control of a harsh master. The new life I had hoped for stretched dismally ahead of me.

Emily Olmstead returned to the dining room having finished the dishes.

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She sat down glancing from her husband to me.

"What have you been saying to Miss McFarland, Jim? She looks positively miserable."

"I've simply been informing her of what is expected of her," he muttered defensively. Emily Olmstead looked sympathetic.

"I suppose you neglected to tell her the good points." What good points? I wanted to know. She answered without my asking.

"The children are wonderful. Except the Poole boys, of course. You'll have your hands full with them."

"Em, will you please . . ." James Olmstead protested unsuccessfully.

"Reverend Hayes's four sons are perfect little angels, and all very quick-witted. So is Toby Carmichael. And Hudson Thomas's little girl, Margaret, is a spunky, sweet child. Linda Bennett, Jordan's daughter, is the prettiest and also the quietest. It's no wonder—"

"Em!" This time the husband was heard. "Miss McFarland can't be bothered with your senseless gossip. Right now I think she would rather have a good night's sleep. She's got a full day ahead of her tomorrow cleaning out the schoolhouse."

"Is she going to stay there tonight?" Emily gasped.

"Why shouldn't she? Now don't start in again, Em! Berthamae took fresh linen this afternoon and made up the bed for her. The place is a bit dusty but perfectly habitable." Emily looked from him to me and then down at her hands clasped in her lap.

"I shall be fine, really, Mrs. Olmstead. You've been very kind. I'm so tired, I'll sleep like the dead."

Emily Olmstead's rosy cheeks went white.

"Get your shawl, Em," her husband said. She hesitated, but her husband's look had her to her feet.

With the Olmsteads, I retraced my afternoon walk up Main Street. Emily's earlier exuberance was curbed. She hardly uttered a word all the way. The sky was darkening and a few stars were out. At the end of the street I saw a modest building surrounded by a poorly repaired picket fence. Weeds grew high around the building that seemed to stare at me with its two broken windows. The place looked as tired, disheveled, and lonely as I felt.

Emily Olmstead stopped at the gate. "I'll wait here," she said, ignoring her husband's scowl.

"Em, for goodness' sakes . . ."

"I'll wait here," she said, adamant.

Olmstead sighed. "All right. I'll be out in a minute," he muttered and held the gate open for me. He lit a lantern just inside the schoolhouse door and handed it to me. He pointed across the schoolroom at a closed door.

"Your quarters are right through there. Kindling and wood are out back. We'll keep you supplied with what you need for the schoolroom. It gets cold in winter. The roof in your room doesn't leak as far as I know, but if it does, the school board will make arrangements to have someone come by and fix it. You'll be paid at the end of each month. Twenty-five dollars as we agreed in our letter. Since you've got a place to live, you'll be saving rent. Food comes cheap hereabouts. It's cattle and farming country and people will be glad to share what they have with you." Implying that I was to beg for handouts? I wondered. Dear God, my situation became worse by the minute.

"Well, that's about it," he finished. He handed me the lighted lantern, giving me a grim smile. "Speaking on behalf of the community, we're glad to have you here. We hope you stay."

"Thank you." I managed a semblance of a smile. He turned away, eager to be gone.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he said, turning back again. "The well is about two hundred yards back from the schoolhouse. You'll have to tote your water. There are buckets just outside the back door, but don't forget about the steps. The bottom two are broken."

"I won't forget." My voice sounded flat.

"Good night, then," he said and walked out the door. I stood in the classroom and looked around. The floor was dust-coated. Desks were shoved around, three smashed and broken in a heap. The walls were gray. Spider webs with their lurking inhabitants were suspended from room corners and jumbled books reclined in a rickety cabinet. The teacher's desk at the front of the classroom was bare except for the dirt that had accumulated with time. A message was scrawled in childish writing across the blackboard. *All who enter here be warned.*

As I crossed the room to the door of my quarters, I left footprints in the dust. My heart sank to even deeper depths as I peered into the room that was to be my home from now on. It was sparsely furnished with an old commode containing three small drawers and a wood burning stove. Drab, faded curtains hung in the one window, effectively blotting out any light that might have entered the dreary room.

There was plenty of work ahead of me tomorrow, I thought. I would not have time for self-pity and thoughts of what might have been had the Haversalls been honest, loving guardians. But the loneliness. Would I be able to bear that?

There was a stillness and quiet around me like a shroud. After a few minutes, I became aware of a cricket rubbing its courtship song somewhere in my room. Outside an owl hooted from one of the oaks.

My companions, I thought. Then, putting my hands up to my face, I began to cry.

The next day was a nightmare of scrubbing and scouring. Falling into bed that night, I expected to find sleep immediately, but all I could think of was the work yet ahead of me; the lessons to prepare for thirty-four children, the yard work, the minor repairs, such as the picket fence, the squeaking doors, the torn bookbindings, the loose chalk tray, the wobbly desks. So many things to do and only a few more days in which to do them. I had never worked so hard in my life.

The third day saw me on my hands and knees scrubbing floors. By the end of that day, my back ached, my legs were stiff with soreness, and my arms felt like limbs of wood.

The following morning I was in much better spirits, though still tired and stiff. I took care of minor repairs, including the picket fence. I had checked all the desks and found most of them in good repair. I used the three smashed ones for firewood. It was Saturday and school was scheduled to start on Monday.

I spent Sunday making lesson plans. Nervous excitement kept me awake the whole night, and the rising sun found me nervous, but smiling.

Just after eight, I spotted a man riding down the hill behind the schoolhouse. Trailing reluctantly after him were two children on matching pintos. The three stopped for a moment, and the man spoke to the children: a girl in a pretty lilac dress and a boy in somber brown pants and shirt. Then the three rode forward. As they came out of the shadows of the oaks, I recognized Jordan Bennett.

I hurried from my window to the back door, starting down the steps and hearing the crack just as I remembered Olmstead's warning about the stairs. I jumped down over the last two and heard Jordan Bennett laughing.

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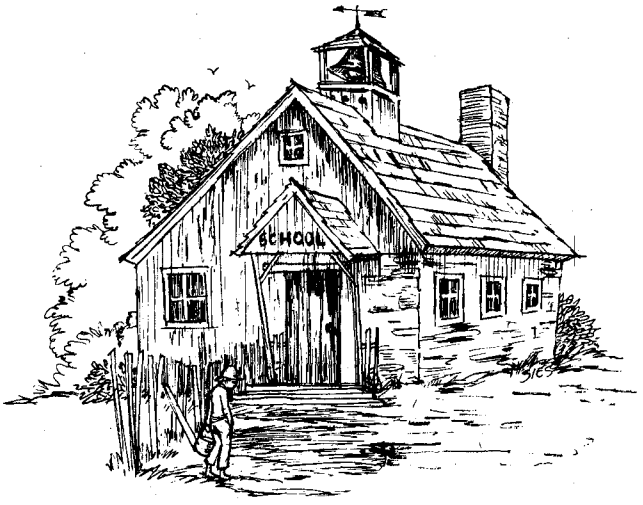

My heart pounded, but I smiled brightly and strode through the tall grass to meet the approaching trio.

"Are you really that eager?" Bennett grinned.

I ignored that and turned to look at the children. Neither resembled Bennett, but both were beautiful in contrasting ways. The little girl whom I assumed to be Linda was looking surreptitiously through a veil of fair lashes. Her eyes were an unusual violet. The smile on her face was faint with shyness.

The boy, not much older than the girl, was dark-skinned, black-haired and brown-eyed. He looked at me with openly curious appraisal, but I noticed a tension about him.

"Miss McFarland," Bennett doffed his hat mockingly. "Meet my daughter, Linda, and Diego Gutierrez, the son of my housekeeper. Say good morning to your new schoolteacher, children." Both children mumbled some polite, mechanical response. "Now go on into the schoolhouse and get the best seats you can. Today should prove very interesting." They obeyed.

"You're looking rather tired this morning, Miss McFarland."

"I should."

"Oh? Did you do a little work around here?" he asked, glancing around the overgrown schoolyard to which I had not yet attended. "It doesn't look like it."

My smile stayed plastered to my face, but I knew my eyes were speaking volumes. "Give it a few days, Mr. Bennett, and you might be very surprised."

"I do so hope so," he said.

I waved my hand in airy dismissal. "Will you be returning for the children, or are they permitted to find their way home without your escort?"

"They can make the ride by themselves," he admitted, and I sighed in obvious relief. "But I think I'll come back for them anyway. I want to hear all the gory details of your first day teaching," he added. Livid, I started to march back toward the schoolhouse.

"Oh, Miss McFarland," Bennett called in overly polite tones. I ignored him and kept walking.

"Miss McFarland," he said, the politeness gone. I let out my breath in irritation and turned around.

"What is it, Mr. Bennett?" I snapped.

"Do be sure to have a very pleasant day." He succeeded in presenting a cultured Bostonian accent, exaggerated just enough.

I curtsied prettily. "Why, how nice of you, Mr. Bennett. And I will do just that as soon as you turn your old cow pony around and ride over yonder hill." I managed a fair attempt at a western drawl.

He was laughing at me again, satisfied that he had aroused my anger. "See you at three, Abby," he said, further infuriating me by his use of that nickname.

By ten to nine, thirty-one children had arrived and were seated in the schoolhouse. The din of noise almost deafened me as I sat at the front desk looking over my charges and silently gathering my courage. The only quiet children were Linda Bennett and Diego Gutierrez who had chosen back corner seats together. Linda sat watching the ruckus with her hands folded on the desk. Diego watched with wary interest.

Just ahead of them, separated by one desk, was pretty little Margaret Hudson with her sandy-brown pigtails and laughing hazel eyes. She was leaning across the aisle to talk to Patricia Studebaker. Her brother Chester was deep in conversation with Toby Carmichael, a redheaded, freckled boy with sad, expressive eyes. On the other side of the room, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John Hayes—the reverend's sons—were chortling together. Other children chattered with friends they had not seen for sometime.

Just as I was about to call the class to order, two older boys made a noisy entrance. They laughed boisterously as they slouched down into two front desks. I assumed these were the notorious Poole boys, Sherman and Grant.

"Silence, please!" I cried above the din, but the noise continued.

"Silence, *please!*" I said much louder. All but the Poole boys were quiet.

"Whenever you're ready, gentlemen," I said, staring at each boy in turn, anger conquering my nervousness. Something in my expression must have reached them, for they flushed slightly and dropped into silence.

"Thank you," I said quietly.

It took steadier nerves than I knew I possessed, but the first day went quite well. There were the usual groans when I mentioned homework and cheers when I said we would all pitch in to clean up the backyard and install a baseball diamond. I was also able to get the classroom's verbal cooperation in agreeing to paint the classroom.

I suspect I made my greatest gain when I told them at the end of the day to wear clothes they wouldn't mind getting dirty, because we were going to make school fun as well as instructive. After that there was a mass scrambling for the door and rollicking laughter as children surged out of the building and ran off in all directions. Only Linda Bennett and Diego Gutierrez remained sitting in the back of the classroom. Both looked relieved that school was over. Linda was tracing carved initials on the desk top with her finger while Diego watched me.

"Diego," I said, meeting the boy's scrutiny. "Your printing is excellent. I'd like you to help John Hayes and Toby Carmichael improve theirs."

The boy's expression clouded. "They won't let me," he told me flatly.

"Why do you think that?"

"They won't," he repeated harshly. "Just take my word for it."

"Can we try anyway?"

He did not answer, but I could see that he was thinking about it.

"How about if I just put you in a

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group with those two boys? Then they can learn from you without having their noses pushed into it," I suggested, supposing that there must be some animosity between the boys. They had not played together in the schoolyard, but then, Diego had not once attempted to join in the group games.

"Maybe," he said reluctantly. Linda looked up, those marvelous violet eyes clear for a moment of their shyness.

"The other boys won't play with Diego because he's Mexican," she explained candidly.

"How can you be sure that the other boys feel that way?" I asked Diego. "You didn't try to join in their games. Have you tried before?"

"No," he admitted.

"He came to school two years ago," Linda started to say, but Diego gave her a glance and she stopped.

"And?" I looked at Diego. He averted his gaze and stared toward the blackboard. There was no defiance in his attitude. Linda looked at him.

"Tell her, Diego . . ." she pleaded softly.

"No," he snapped, glaring at her. "And you'd better not either." There was more pride than threat in those words and Linda sighed.

"Well, how did it go?" I looked up sharply to see Jordan Bennett lounging in the doorway. He directed his question to the children and then glanced briefly in my direction. Linda ran to him, and he lifted her up with an affectionate laugh which did something strange to my stomach. Linda chattered with more animation than she had all day while Diego approached with more dignity. Bennett asked a question in fluent Spanish, and the boy answered with one word.

"*Bueno*," he nodded, smiling up at Jordan Bennett. Bennett looked across the room at me as I busied myself with the children's papers.

"You don't look any the worse for wear," he said.

"How did you expect me to look?" I managed an amused laugh.

"A little more haggard than you do," he admitted. "But as you said this morning . . . give it a day or two."

Why was he so antagonistic? "Are you hoping I'll last only a few days?" I watched him, appalled as he considered the question seriously. It was as effective as a slap in the face.

"The children need a teacher," he commented. "You'll do as well as anyone else they could find around here."

"Thank you for your vote of confidence," I muttered. I looked away from his penetrating eyes to the two children watching us curiously. "I'll see you both tomorrow," I told them, hoping Bennett would take the hint and leave. He read my thoughts.

"Good afternoon, Miss McFarland." He doffed his hat.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Bennett."

For the next few days, school progressed well. I kept the children busy with class assignments. During recess, I gave them a choice of outdoor play or painting in the classroom. Many preferred to plaster the walls with colorful frescoes of trees, people, animals, and designs. After two days, the room was a bright mural of varying talent. Several plants sat on my desk and the corner bookshelf. Scraps of material had been sewn together by the girls to make colorful curtains for the still unrepaired front windows.

Few difficulties arose among the children. After Diego's initial reluctance, he agreed to move into the group of boys including John and Toby. He was welcomed without comment, and the boys began to copy his writing techniques when they heard me praise his work. Later, Diego began to join in the outdoor games, leaving Linda free to become acquainted with several of the girls her own age. Still shy, she became friends with the more extroverted Margaret Hudson who hardly gave her a chance to speak.

When Saturday came, I was grateful for the day's respite. Though I thoroughly enjoyed the classroom hours with the children, my schedule had been grueling. Papers and lesson plans kept me up late each night and I had to arise early each morning to get everything ready for the children.

Intending to do my wash, I was in the process of toting water when I heard laughter coming from the front yard. Peering around from the back I spied Jordan Bennett coming up the street perched on his buckboard, a sturdy horse following on a lead. In the back of the wagon was a hand plow. Sherman and Grant were following behind the horse and laughing.

From the gleam in Bennett's eyes, I knew that his intention was to make me look a complete fool.

"Good morning, Mr. Bennett," I greeted him pleasantly enough. "How kind of you to come by to plow our play yard for us."

Bennett laughed. "Nice try," he said in a low voice only I could hear. "Just unload it over there, boys," he instructed Sherman and Grant. Matthew Hayes had arrived with two of his brothers. They all were eager to help.

"The horse and plow are my contribution to your clean-up efforts," he said cheerfully.

"I'm sure I should be grateful," I said glumly.

"I'll even be kind enough to give you a quick lesson," he went on. I knew he expected me to decline and tell him what he could do with his horse and plow.

"All right," I agreed. "I'm more than willing to learn."

"We'll see if you have the back muscles for it. A woman of your intelligence should be quick enough to learn something as simple as plowing a field. Wouldn't you say?"

"I don't imagine I'll be the first."

With a few succinct instructions, he showed me how to harness the horse, who was looking dubious about the whole thing. I eyed him warily, half expecting him to kick me. Bennett looped the reins about my shoulders, positioned the plow, then stood back. I had watched the play of his hard muscles through the cotton shirt. He made everything look easy and my confidence grew. After taking the plow for a step or two, he turned the job over to me.

It was not as easy as it looked. I mimicked his movements. Fortunately, the knowledge that he and five of my students were watching gave me added strength. After about twenty feet, I knew it would be impossible for me to plow the play yard myself. My back and arms were already aching.

Something scurried through the grass and startled the horse. He bolted to the side, jerking the plow out of my hands and making me fall heavily to the ground. My thigh hit something hard and I gasped in pain. I barely had enough time to get my breath when Bennett was leaning down, intending to haul me up like a sack of potatoes.

"I can get up by myself, thank you, Mr. Bennett." I pulled my arm away from his, keeping my face averted so he could not see how much my leg hurt. He disregarded my words and grasped me around the waist to lift me to my feet.

"Are you always so damned stubborn?" he demanded, his face so close to mine that his breath fanned my cheeks. "You didn't seriously think I'd let you plow this damn yard, did you? Now what did you do to your leg?"

"It's nothing," I stammered, unable to pull my eyes away from his. My heart was thudding frantically and my breathing was shallow. His eyes nar-

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rowed, dropping to my mouth.

"Are you all right, Miss McFarland?" Sherman Poole asked, running over, his brother in his wake.

"Yes, I'm fine," I said, my voice overly bright. I pushed Jordan Bennett's hand away from my arm.

"If you want to help, take over the plow," Jordan told the boys. "That's if you know how." Sherman, gazing moon-eyed at me, did so while Grant argued that he wanted a turn.

"Look, Miss McFarland, it's easy. I'll have this done in an hour," Sherman boasted.

"Come on, Sherman. Give me a chance," Grant grumbled.

"Two conquests already. And the Poole boys, no less," Bennett observed.

"I think I've had about enough of you, Mr. Bennett," I said in a low voice.

"Have you now, Abby?"

"I don't remember giving you permission to call me by my Christian name let alone putting it in that form."

"You're more an Abby than an Abigail," he said, his eyes moving with a strange intimacy over my face. "Wide eyes, the color of turquoise with gold nuggets . . . and red hair."

"My hair is not red . . ." I said, squirming uneasily under his gaze. If he could look at me like that, how did he look at his wife?

"Auburn then, if it makes a difference," he conceded. "I'll bet it would be wild and soft if you ever let it out of that god-awful bun you wear." He reached out to touch it almost as though he meant to remove the pins, and I jolted back, flushing with embarrassment. Flustered, I did not know what to say and stepped quickly by him. He was smiling, silently laughing at my reaction to him.

Looking away from his taunting face, I saw James Olmstead striding up the street. He looked anything but approving. Berthamae Poole was coming up the opposite side of McPherson, and her expression boded no good.

"Oh, no," I breathed.

"What's the matter, Miss McFarland? Are your teaching methods about to bring the town citizens down upon your head?" Bennett chuckled.

"I don't know what you mean."

"You know exactly what I mean, Abby," he said softly. "I've been getting rather interesting reports from Linda and Diego."

"What sort of reports?" I asked.

"Pilfered paints, picture painting on the schoolroom walls, children digging latrines. Working the children like little slaves when they're not vandalizing community property."

"That's not the truth . . ." I started defensively, but he cut me off.

"Fine moral example you're presenting, huh?" He raised his brows expressively. "You should be ashamed. And you have a right to look like a scared rabbit." He glanced at James Olmstead and Berthamae Poole coming to the gate. "If I'm right, you're about to be nailed to the cross."

"I'm sure you'll enjoy staying around to watch," I retorted, walking away from him and forcing a smile at Olmstead.

"Grant Poole!" Berthamae Poole yelled, her face an unbecoming mottled red. "What on earth are you doing behind that plow?" The boy started guiltily and blushed as he glanced at me. Sherman was red-faced as well.

"You two boys get over here this minute. If you two are so eager to work, you can just get on home and do the chores!" she shouted at them, then glared at me accusingly.

"Ma . . ." Grant tried to interrupt.

"Shut your mouth and move!" The two boys hot-footed it down the street, their mother following. The Hayes boys scattered.

"I thought you understood the rules, Miss McFarland," Olmstead began. "You're not off to a very good start on a number of counts."

I heard Bennett approach and silently groaned. What wonderful contribution would he make to this scene? James Olmstead looked from Bennett to me, and his expression was insinuating.

"What are you doing here, Jordan?"

Jordan Bennett laughed easily. "Now hold on just a minute, Jim. You're not implying there's anything between Miss McFarland and myself, are you?" His tone made such an idea ludicrous in the extreme. I came close to hating him again.

"No, I'm not," Olmstead said, "but rules are made with good reason. We've got to think of the children. Which brings me to another point, Miss McFarland." He swung back to me. "I've been hearing some things from Andrew that I hope aren't true."

"Since I don't know what you are referring to, perhaps you should enlighten me, Mr. Olmstead," I said with cool dignity.

"I'll just look for myself and save the questions," he said, marching through the gate and up the path to the schoolhouse. I followed slowly, raising fingertips to the throbbing veins in my temple. The painful bump on my thigh hurt as I walked, but I forced myself not to limp, well aware that Bennett was watching me.

James Olmstead appeared at the top of the steps. "Come in here and explain this appalling mess to me!"

When I entered the schoolroom, Olmstead was staring around him as though he could not believe his eyes.

"I couldn't believe what Andy told me this morning until I saw with my own two eyes," he said, still staring at the walls. "How could you do this?" he demanded furiously. "How could you allow the children to desecrate this schoolhouse in such an unthinkable way?"

I stiffened. "I think it's an improvement over what I found ten days ago," I said in a clear, controlled voice. I heard Bennett enter the classroom and laugh under his breath.

"An improvement?" Olmstead was aghast.

"I will admit there isn't a Rembrandt in Sycamore Hill, but they worked hard and did their best to make this schoolhouse a little more pleasant than it was," I told him. I met Olmstead's cold eyes. "Four days of scrubbing and scouring cannot remove dirt allowed to accumulate over a year, Mr. Olmstead. If this schoolhouse was such hallowed ground, why was it allowed to fall into such sad disrepair?"

"She's got you there, Jim," Bennett chuckled. Olmstead's face turned an angry red.

"And what about children digging the latrine out back?" he demanded.

"I had hoped that was one of those heavy chores you referred to when we talked."

"Don't be impertinent, Miss McFarland," Olmstead snapped.

I sighed. "I did not have time to dig a four-foot hole, so the chore goes to those children who refuse to listen or who cause mischief in class."

"Oh." Some of the steam seeped out of his arguments, but he was struggling to work up more. He enjoyed asserting his authority.

"Might I ask when you can replace the windows?" I asked, hoping to change the subject.

"There's no hurry to do that," Olmstead said. "It's still summer." He was glowering again. "It seems to me that you're putting off onto the children what you should be doing yourself."

That hurt, for I had tried very hard to be fair. There were few enough hours in a day for me to manage the cleaning, lesson plans, and paper correcting required without being expected to dig latrines and plow yards.

"It's a matter of priorities, Mr. Olm-

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stead," I said with conviction, though inside I was beginning to tremble under the strain of this scene. What would I do if he dismissed me? Where would I go?

"What priorities?" he demanded. "It seems to me you were well aware of your duties the night we discussed them. You agreed to carry them out. *All* of them. You're being paid to do just that."

"I've only been in town ten days—"

"And you're already off to a bad start," Olmstead interrupted.

"Teaching the children has to come first," I said.

"Well, then teach them, Miss McFarland! Painting walls and digging holes isn't in any of the textbooks that I remember." He glanced around again. "I'll get some whitewash so you can cover these . . . paintings." With that, he marched back out of the schoolhouse with a look of satisfaction. My shoulders drooped, and I unconsciously rubbed my bruised thigh.

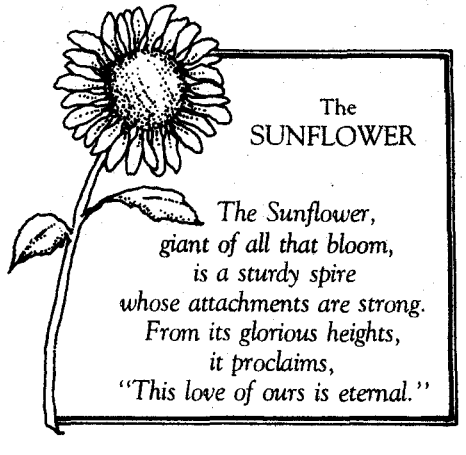
"You hurt yourself when you fell, didn't you?" Bennett said from close behind me.

"Nothing that won't mend, Mr. Bennett," I said harshly, keeping my face averted. My mouth was trembling, and I knew there was little color in my face. He moved closer, putting his hands on my shoulders. I jerked away.

"I think you had better leave, Mr. Bennett, before Mr. Olmstead decides to add other misdemeanors to the list he's making against me."

"Such as what, Abby? Indiscreet behavior for being alone with me . . . or are you bent on murder?" He released me, and I spun around.

"You think this is all very funny, don't you?" I flared, blinking rapidly to stop the tears. "Well, laugh your fill and then leave me alone. I haven't got a ranch or a family. If I lose this position . . ." I stopped. What did this man care whether I lost my position or not?



"I don't feel like laughing, Abby," Bennett said quietly.

"I'll thank you not to call me that. You have no right."

Jordan Bennett's expression hardened.

"I'll call you any damn thing I please," he retaliated. "And if you think what you've just been through is anything, you're sadly mistaken. Things aren't even warmed up."

I stared at him questioningly, but he was not going to enlighten me.

"I'll say it again. You'll make a very poor schoolmarm."

I did not feel like arguing with him anymore and gave a slight shrug of indifference. "Well, we all aren't born with choices, Mr. Bennett."

He turned without another word and strode out of the schoolhouse. I closed my eyes and let out my breath wondering why I felt like crying.

The week I had thought had gone so well was in shreds. In addition, that night I thought I heard someone moving about in the schoolroom. When I got up and went in to investigate, there was no one there. My only company were the shadows from the oaks and the wind that fluttered through the patchwork curtains, but in the morning when I went into the classroom to clean up, my eyes caught something written on the blackboard. The words jumped out at me, making me forget my frustration.

Leave before it is too late.

The writing was scrawled, the letters uneven and jerky as though written by an unsure hand. Or a child. It was not the first such message I had received as a teacher and I decided to ignore it as I had the others. A student's practical joke, I thought with a wry smile. I took a rag and cleaned the board.

The Reverend Jonah Hayes had missed his calling, I thought regretfully as I left the church among the other chastened members of the congregation. The hellfire-and-damnation sermon was still ringing in my abused ears. How could I ever teach Sunday school in such an uncharitable man's church?

"Miss McFarland," Emily Olmstead broke into my dreary musing. "I would like to introduce Miss Ellen Greer," she said. I looked at the small ancient woman standing next to Emily, leaning heavily on a cane. One arthritically deformed hand lay over another and her feet were planted slightly apart to hold herself as erect as possible. Miss Greer was old and ugly, but she had the brightest pair of gray eyes I had ever seen.

The Olmsteads left and Miss Greer's lips twitched for a second before speaking. "How old are you, Miss McFarland?" she asked in a clear contralto. I thought the question impertinent even for an old lady and I pretended not to hear it.

She gave a low laugh. "Apparently lack of respect for your elders is yet another fault of yours."

I stiffened under that assault and barely prevented an angry retort to the woman's rudeness.

"Don't look so testy, my dear," Ellen Greer chided. "I heartily approve," she added conspiratorially. Then she tapped the oak cane. "Come and walk me home. You and I have many things to talk over."

What an imperious old lady, I thought with surprise. However, curiosity made me obey. Keeping my pace slow, I waited for the old woman to reveal what "things" she had referred to.

"Curse these old legs of mine," Ellen Greer muttered angrily. "They're just about as useless as the licorice sticks Sherman Poole lives on."

I laughed and then quickly apologized.

"Don't ever apologize, Miss McFarland. If you do, that will be the biggest fault on your record."

Before I could comment, she stopped and thrust her cane at a white picket fence. "Open the gate, Miss McFarland," she snapped irritably, and I did, feeling a twinge of resentment at her tone.

"You live here?" I asked inanely, looking up almost longingly at the hospitable exterior, for this was the home I had dreamed of as my own on first entering Sycamore Hill.

"Don't ask such stupid questions," Ellen Greer snorted. "Well, come on, Miss McFarland," she went on impatiently, pausing several paces inside the gate. "I haven't got all day."

"I have better things to do with my day than spend it with a discourteous old woman," I said coldly.

Ellen Greer's eyes sparkled and she laughed delightedly. "I wondered how much you would take from me."

I stared at her, completely baffled.

"You've got more spirit than I had at your age, my dear," Ellen chortled. "That may be an advantage . . . but then again, it may not be. But whatever, I heartily approve of you. Now, please come in and make an old woman's afternoon less of a bore."

Ellen Greer lived in a small room at the back of the boarding house. It was

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furnished with less than my own quarters, but boasted a few plaques on the wall. When I started to read them, Ellen Greer dismissed them.

"Those were in place of a salary increase and a pension," Ellen explained with a sniff for their importance. I read them and turned to look back at her.

"You were the schoolteacher here?" I said with surprise. No one had ever said anything about who the previous teacher was. This must be the teacher who had quit over a year ago.

"I spent most of my life living in that broken-down shack they call a schoolhouse," Ellen Greer said as she sat in a window chair and tucked a crocheted afghan around her thin legs. "Oh, that's better," she sighed. "I just can't walk on these sticks anymore."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know . . ."

"How were you expected to? Emily forgot to mention it. She never was one of my brighter pupils. She would have forgotten her head every morning if the good Lord hadn't sewn it on."

I suppressed a laugh with effort.

"Sit down, girl." Ellen Greer thrust her cane at a chair across the room. "Drag the thing over here so I can have a better look at you."

"It seems to me you looked your fill, Miss Greer," I smiled.

"Don't provoke me," she snapped, her mouth drawing into a tighter pucker, while her eyes sparkled with laughter. "And you have my permission to call me Ellen since we are fellow teachers."

"Ellen, then. And please call me Abigail instead of girl," I said, liking the old lady immensely in spite of her abrupt manner.

"Abby does you better," she decided, and I was reminded of Jordan Bennett. "I'll call you that as it pleases me. It's a right of age."

I looked around the room, admiring the crocheted bedspread and the lacy doilies on the small bookshelf that boasted Dickens, Shakespeare, Longfellow, and Dumas.

"My niece allows me to live here on sufferance," Ellen explained without self-pity or bitterness. "She's a nice enough girl, but she would prefer having the extra ten dollars a month this room would bring. And I can't blame her. She's got four growing children to feed and clothe, and her worthless husband up and died on her ten years ago. He wasn't much when he was alive, but at least Amelia didn't have to work cooking and cleaning for seven boarders." She stopped a minute and then asked again, "How old are you, Abby?"

"Twenty-four."

"You don't look it. But give it time and you will," she muttered.

"Don't sound so encouraging," I said.

"You may as well know what you're in for, girl. And I don't for the life of me know what's wrong with you that you haven't got a man of your own. It's not the usual thing to have a schoolteacher with your looks. Usually they're old battle-axes like me. What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"Ask James Olmstead. I'm sure he could supply you with several answers to that question."

Ellen chuckled. "The children used to call him Tattle Tom because he always liked to see and tell the worst about everyone."

"Age hasn't improved him, apparently," I mumbled and then flushed bright red with embarrassment at my wayward tongue. "He has been . . . kind." I tried to amend the damage.

"Oh, hogwash!" Ellen said in disgust. "James Olmstead is not kind. Emily perhaps . . . when she can get away with it. But James? Ha!" She leaned forward in her chair, jabbing her finger toward me. "Now, let's get one thing agreed between us. We'll be honest with each other. I can't abide any more amenities.

"Besides," Ellen said more levelly, "I've a feeling we're birds of a feather. You're going to need to talk to someone if you intend to keep your wits. I had family I could go to when things worried me down. But you have no one if my gossiping sources are correct." She raised thin gray brows questioningly.

"Your sources are correct," I answered with a faint smile, wondering who she had been talking to to learn that tidbit of information. "My parents died when I was five and I was reared by guardians."

"And what happened to them?"

"They were killed in a carriage accident about six months ago."

"Did bill collectors get the lot?"

I laughed slightly at Ellen's nosiness. "A nephew inherited," I answered, without adding details.

"I suspect there's more to that story than you're telling," Ellen said acutely, watching my face. "All right, I won't ask," she said with a wave of her gnarled hand. "Not today, anyway. What do you think of Sycamore Hill?"

"It's a nice community."

Ellen sniffed. "A very nice, safe answer. Forget the buildings and let's get down to the people."

"You hardly give a person a chance to breathe, do you?"

"I learned that during my schoolteaching days. It helped me keep one step ahead of those wild little Indians. If you take my advice, you'll do the same thing. Keep them so busy their heads spin. Then they won't have time to make your life a misery. And believe me, they can do it! Children have cunning, devious little minds." She waved her hand again, cutting off any comment. "And don't try to tell me they're little angels, all sweetness and light. They'd be abnormal if they were! Even the quiet, dumb ones have some mischief on their minds. As long as they're alive and kicking, that's the way they should be."

"Well, so far they're behaving remarkably well," I insisted, wanting very much to laugh again.

"Give them time," Ellen Greer said. "Right now they're on their Sunday-best behavior. Monday will arrive anytime and then we'll see what stuff you're made of."

"I do believe you're trying to frighten me off."

"You'll do just fine. You look soft, but I think there's a determined streak in you." She nodded. "Yes, Abby my dear, you'll do just fine. Now, who have you met or who do you want to know about?"

I considered a moment before I spoke. "I haven't really met very many people as yet. The Olmsteads, of course."

"Of course," Ellen muttered, "and Bertie Poole from what I hear."

"Yes . . ."

"She didn't like her boys digging a latrine or plowing the play yard," the old woman chuckled. "When I heard about that I knew we were going to get on together. The last teacher was over her head."

"The last teacher? I thought . . ."

"That I was? No, my dear. I retired five years ago. I worked until I was seventy-five and then couldn't handle it anymore."

"Then who . . . ?"

"A weak little drudge named Prudence Townsend."

"That's not very kind," I admonished.

"No, I don't suppose it is. But she was pathetic as a teacher. She was nice, and that was her problem. The children ran all over her. A teacher needs a strong hand."

"I don't think I could use corporal punishment," I admitted.

"You won't have to as long as you

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have latrines to dig and play yards to plow," Ellen Greer chortled. "I would have loved to see the Poole boys at that. As bad as they are they have intelligence beneath all that curly hair."

"They are bright," I agreed.

"They didn't get it from Bertie or Branford. I had both in my class . . . the parents first, then the two boys."

"How on earth did you ever last fifty-five years?" I asked.

"By following a few basic rules which I will now kindly pass on to you," she said seriously. "I kept my thoughts to myself . . . believe it or not. I obeyed the rules as closely as possible and when I had to break them I didn't apologize or take any guff from a James Olmstead." She tapped her cane on the floor. "And there's another thing. Schoolteachers are hard to come by. It's a thankless job for the most part. Of course, there are bright spots ahead of you."

"For example . . ." I prompted.

"You may have some gifted student that will make every dumb one worthwhile."

"You did?"

"Indeed, I did. He only went to school here until he was fourteen. Then his mother took my advice and shipped him off back East to finish his schooling. He'd long since learned everything I could teach him and he was hungry for more. He went on through Harvard and got his law degree." Ellen's voice softened, and she looked out the window. "I was real proud of him." She did not speak for a minute and then looked back at me.

"Of course, he made some stupid mistakes along the way, like marrying himself a brainless, selfish little society girl." She shook her head in disgust, then waved her hand in her characteristic gesture of dismissal. "Oh, but enough on that. It's ancient history. Anyway, you'll have your bright spots. One Jordan Bennett makes all the Berties worth it."

"Jordan Bennett?" I choked.

"You've met him, have you?"

"Yes." I couldn't help the way I said it, or looked after I said it. Ellen Greer leaned forward, her sharp eyes curious.

"Do I take it you don't like him?"

"You take it correctly," I muttered under my breath. "And believe me, the feeling is mutual."

The gray eyebrows went up. "How do you know that?"

"He makes it very plain."

"He doesn't usually show his feelings. You say he doesn't like you? Does he have some reason to feel that way?" Those gray-blue eyes were studying me again.

"I don't think so, but then perhaps he does," I admitted. "Our first meeting wasn't very . . . cordial."

"Tell me about it," Ellen ordered, sitting forward and leaning on her cane.

"I'd rather not. That's one episode I would prefer to forget."

"You just made me all the more interested."

"The story would disappoint you, believe me."

"Then we'll shelve Jordan for the moment. But you're more polite than honest, it seems. We'll have to work on overcoming that handicap if you're planning to make Sycamore Hill your permanent home."

"That is going to be up to Mr. Olmstead, I'm afraid," I told her ruefully.

"No. That's going to be up to you. Forget Tattle-Tommy and just do what you think is best for the children. The rest will fall in line. Now be off with you." She dismissed me like a six-year-old child. "My niece will be here any minute now reminding me it's time for my afternoon nap." She shook her head in disgust. "You'd think I would have a little peace at my age . . ."

I started for the door, when Ellen said, "Come for coffee and cake Wednesday at five."

"I will if I can," I promised.

"I'll expect you," Ellen said, a flicker of loneliness appearing before it was squelched. "And Abby," she went on more gently, "it's been a pleasure talking to you. I may decide to live a couple of extra years just to see what happens to you."

Until the fight between Matthew Hayes and Diego Gutierrez, the next several weeks were peaceful. Matthew Hayes, in an effort to gain his father's esteem, had thrown himself into direct competition with Diego who was easily the most gifted student in the class. Both boys were intelligent and ambitious, but Diego was superior. Matthew Hayes possessed a fierce, quick temper, and had a tendency to be vindictive.

Each boy had been made captain of a ball team. Diego's team was winning. The two boys, in an effort to get the ball, knocked together accidentally. In a fury, Matthew fell on Diego, pummeling him with his fists. Diego's own temper, never before seen, burst, and he gave the preacher's son several blows that knocked him to the ground. Not willing to let it go at that, Matthew jumped up as Diego was walking away and attacked him from behind.

It took all my physical strength to break the two boys apart. Diego had a black eye that was rapidly swelling shut and Matthew's nose was bleeding profusely. He howled curses at Diego, who stood looking at the boy with the same contemptuous disgust that I had seen mirrored in Jordan Bennett's face. Afraid to leave the two boys to work out their anger without supervision, I decided to put them at opposite ends of the classroom writing essays on what had happened. As I read them later that afternoon, after the children had gone home, I was appalled at the hatred that spewed out of Matthew Hayes. Diego's comments were restricted to the facts.

The following day was Saturday, and I set to work scrubbing the schoolroom floor again. A hard rapping at the door announced James Olmstead, looking upset.

"I've been with some of the school board members in a special meeting," he began uncomfortably. I braced myself, almost sure of what was coming.

"It has come to our attention that Diego Gutierrez beat up Matthew Hayes."

"That isn't at all what happened," I said, surprised.

"What did happen?"

"Matthew Hayes started a fight with Diego Gutierrez over a ball game. Diego was as badly hurt in the fight as Matthew."

"You shouldn't have allowed it to happen," Olmstead said critically.

"No. I should have seen it coming. The boys have been competing in almost everything. . . ."

"Then that makes our decision all the more proper under the circumstances."

"What decision? And what circumstances?" I demanded.

"That Diego Gutierrez be removed from this school. His presence alone is enough to cause trouble. We don't want our children exposed to his kind."

"But Diego didn't start the trouble. Matthew Hayes did," I said angrily.

"Were you there to witness the whole thing?"

"Well, no, but the other children corroborated Diego's story." From Olmstead's expression, the children's decision to side with Diego was another count against him.

"Nevertheless," he said, discounting what I said, "he never belonged in this school. He's a Mexican. And he's a bas-

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tard. He should not be allowed to socialize with our children."

A bastard! Bennett's? A sick feeling began to churn my stomach.

"You're slandering the boy, Mr. Olmstead."

"Everybody in town knows what he is," Olmstead told me, though he flushed slightly. "Reva Gutierrez has been living with Jordan Bennett for years."

This was getting worse by the minute.

"Diego Gutierrez has a right to an education whatever the relationship between his mother and Mr. Bennett."

"Let Bennett send him somewhere else then. That boy doesn't belong with decent people."

I was appalled at the unfairness of Olmstead and the rest of the board members.

"And what happens to Matthew Hayes? You won't be helping that boy by solving his problems this way."

"Matthew Hayes will return to school as always."

"Without any disciplinary measures for what he did? He was devious and cowardly in his actions of running to his father with that untruthful story."

"He defended himself," Olmstead said firmly.

"Nothing will change your mind, will it?"

"You are to go to Eden Rock and tell Jordan Bennett and Reva Gutierrez of the board's decision."

"You expect *me* to carry that odious slander against Diego?" I gasped.

"It's more than obvious you favor the boy," Olmstead said. "Perhaps your favoritism brought on this whole unfortunate incident."

"I suspect it started long before I ever even heard of Sycamore Hill, Mr. Olmstead. It's a thing called bigotry."

"Don't be impertinent!" Olmstead snapped. "If you want to keep your job, you'll carry out your responsibilities. and one of your responsibilities is to inform Diego and his parents that he is no longer welcome at this school. Is that clearly understood, Miss McFarland?"

I remembered what Ellen Greer had said about teachers being hard to find because the job was a thankless one. I knew that I could refuse to take this message to Diego, but what was the alternative? James Olmstead would go. Or Reverend Hayes himself. I could well imagine what would be said to Diego in that case. The boy would be terribly hurt with perhaps a memory that would last him his lifetime. I could not allow that to happen.

"I understand you very well indeed, Mr. Olmstead," I said coldly. He flushed slightly and then left.

I put my head in my hands. How was I going to tell Diego that he was no longer welcome at school because he had defended himself? What would it do to him? On top of the hurt it would cause him, how was I going to face Jordan Bennett with the board's decision? The fact I did not approve of it would only make him all the more scornful because I was carrying out their dictates without the courage to fight them. Or could I? What was to stop me from tutoring the boy myself?

Jordan Bennett's illegitimate son. What kind of wife could he have that would allow her husband's mistress and son to remain on the ranch? And Reva Gutierrez? What would she be like?

With my Sunday schedule, I had little choice but to leave the schoolhouse cleaning for later that night. James Olmstead had neglected to tell me how to reach Jordan Bennett's ranch, but the man at the livery stable would know, and I needed a horse and buggy.

When I got to the stable, Charles Studebaker informed me that there were no buggies available, but that Jordan Bennett kept a gelding at the stables for the schoolteacher's use. He assured me that the animal was gentle, and having little choice in the matter, I mounted with some trepidation.

Studebaker had given me succinct directions. Six miles, stay on the road, turn onto the left fork when I came to the bridge. For the first couple of miles, I had to slap the horse's rump over and over to keep him going. He had obviously evaluated my mettle as a rider at the onset and knew that he could do as he wished. However, when I neared the fork, he began to walk at a quicker pace, and I felt only vague relief that I would reach the ranch before the following year!

My relief was short-lived. Just past a dried creekbed, the horse's ears perked up and pointed forward. Then he broke into a trot. My head bobbed up and down and I learned quickly to clench my jaws so my teeth would not crack together every time my rear made bruising contact with the saddle. I could barely focus on the jouncing world passing by, and concentrated on holding tight to the pommel and reins.

"Whoa, horse," I begged. "Slow down. Easy, boy. Whoa!" My efforts to pull back on the reins were ignored. The horse clamped his teeth on the bit and was not bothered by my tugging. After half a mile, I started making breathless grunting sounds each time I bounced up and came plopping down.

I saw an immense house set back against an oak-covered range of hills. The details of the tranquil scene were lost on me as I continued being slapped down upon the saddle. My situation struck me as ludicrous. I started to laugh. The sound of it was forced out of me with each jounce I made, and I laughed even harder, praying no one was watching.

The horse trotted on beneath the arch announcing that I had reached my destination. I saw the hitching rail in front of the house, but my animal yanked hard on the bit. The reins burnt my fingers as I tried to steer him to the left. Then he turned right and headed straight for the barn. My laughter ceased.

Jordan Bennett was standing in the yard, watching me. The horse trotted right past him and into the barn. I wanted to die as I heard Jordan Bennett laughing uproariously behind me as the horse finally stopped to thrust his nose deep into a trough of oats.

Then the absurdity of my situation hit me and I started to laugh again. I laughed until tears were running down my cheeks.

"You nasty old nag," I said to the totally disinterested horse on which I sat. "How could you do this to me?" I wiped my face and looked back over my shoulder at Bennett. "You can't know how glad I am that he finally stopped," I admitted, rubbing the small of my back. Bennett was still grinning when he reached the large stall.

"You're the first woman I've ever met who could laugh at herself," he said, his eyes sparkling.

"What else could I do? What a ride! Next time I'll walk." I shook my head. "I never realized how many muscles the human body possessed, but I'm sure every one is bruised!" I looked around and then down. "Could you please tell me how to get off this animal short of falling? I won't tell you how I got aboard."

Jordan laughed again. "It's simple," he assured me and reached up to take me by the waist. "Like this." He lifted me down effortlessly.

I had difficulty breathing when he set me down. His hands were still at my waist and he stopped laughing. I felt he was entirely too close, but I couldn't step away from him. When his head started to descend, I did step back instinctively. I came into contact with the

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horse, feeling the heat of the animal against my back.

Trying desperately to think of something to say, I flushed. Jordan Bennett's eyes had an unnerving intensity. Though he did not move and his hands dropped from me, I felt we were still too close to one another. All the laughter had gone out of both of us. *Say something,* I told myself fiercely, feeling a bubble of panic growing inside me. But it was Bennett who broke the spell.

"What brings you all this way to Eden Rock, Miss McFarland?"

His sudden formality brought me back to my senses. I stared up at him with such distress and embarrassment that he frowned.

"I have to speak with you and Mrs. Gutierrez about Diego." His expression blackened with comprehension.

"About the fight in the school yard," he added and made a sound deep in his throat.

"Yes."

The look he gave me was filled with hostility. "I'll explain the situation to Diego, Miss McFarland," he told me coldly. "It'll hurt less coming from me."

"I would like to speak with him if you don't mind."

"Oh, I mind all right! What is it? You want to give him the glad tidings?" His mouth was hard and uncompromising.

"You don't understand . . ."

"The hell I don't. I understand only too well, Miss McFarland. Does it give you a feeling of power, bringing this kind of news around?"

I stared at him in disbelief and then pushed past him in anger. He stopped me at the barn door. "All right, dammit. You can have the pleasure of breaking the good news. But so help me God," he said through his teeth, "If you make it more hurtful than necessary, I'll personally beat you black and blue. Have you got that in your head, Miss McFarland?"

"Indeed, I do," I said stiffly, turning away quickly so he would not see how much his accusation hurt. Someone called my name in an excited voice.

"Miss McFarland! Miss McFarland! What're you doing here?" Linda called and came running down the steps of the ranch house. Diego followed slowly, a look on his face that twisted my heart. Linda jumped around me excitedly, chattering on about something that did not even register on my mind. I tried to smile at her but could not take my eyes from the boy's. Did he know already?

"Hello, Diego."

"*Buenos dias,* Señorita McFarland," he said, using Spanish with a challenging tilt of his head. That hurt even more because I realized suddenly that this unreasoning prejudice was no new thing to him.

"May I speak with you and your mother, please?"

Diego's eyes showed a telltale moisture, but his full mouth tightened. He breathed in deeply before he spoke and I heard Jordan Bennett mumble something under his breath as he strode away.

"Follow me, please, Miss McFarland."

I followed Diego, noticing how rigidly he held his shoulders. I hardly glanced around the huge living room dominated by a stone fireplace as we passed through. Diego ushered me to the kitchen at the back of the house. A small, slim woman stood near the stove. Her black hair was braided and pinned at the back of her neck. She moved with a lithe grace.

"Mama," Diego announced our presence. Reva Gutierrez turned with a smile for her son and then stopped as she saw me next to him. The smile dimmed.

"Miss McFarland has come to tell you that I am not to return to school again. Isn't that so, Miss McFarland?" Diego said. I looked down at him.

"Diego . . ."

"It isn't the first time this has happened," his mother said before I could say more.

I looked between the two of them, the hurt boy standing with quiet dignity, the angry mother. "Well, I wish you would allow me to say what I came here to say."

Reva Gutierrez frowned. "Then say what you wish, and leave us." Diego was silent, eyes averted, chin trembling.

"I'm afraid it is true about Diego being expelled. The decision was unjust and prejudicial and I apologize for it."

"Did you make it, Miss McFarland?" Reva Guierrez demanded sharply.

"No, I had no part in it."

"Then your apology is meaningless," she snapped. She turned back to her cooking. I knew there was great hurt beneath the anger. Her shoulders were stiff, and her hands were clenching into fists.

"Mrs. Gutierrez . . ."

"Not Mrs. . . . Señorita Gutierrez. I am not married," the young woman corrected, turning around again. "You see, my son has two things against him. He is Mexicano . . . and he is a . . . bastard."

Diego's face twisted as he lost control. He turned and fled the kitchen, the door swinging shut behind him.

"How could you do that to him?" I asked faintly, feeling close to tears myself.

"It isn't I who do the hurt to him," Reva said, her accent thickening as the tears started. "It is you. It is the people in the town."

"I'm sorry, but . . ."

"Being sorry does not help, Miss McFarland."

"I know. That's why I would like to have you bring Diego to me very early each morning so that I can teach him what he would have learned in class," I said in a rush before she could interrupt me again.

"Bring him to school . . . ?"

"If you do not wish to do that, I will come here to the ranch once a week and bring him work and books," I offered.

"You will teach him?" she breathed, her eyes wide and hopeful.

"Diego has a right to his education just as any of the other children, Señorita Gutierrez. If you will allow me, I will be honored to teach him all I know. He is a brilliant boy."

Reva stared and then she started to sob. She looked up at me apologetically, and I knew she couldn't control herself. I started to put an arm around her shoulders when someone burst into the kitchen.

"You've got five minutes to get off my ranch," Bennett said evenly. But hatred blazed behind his eyes. He reached out, took my arm, and roughly pointed me toward the door. "Didn't you hear what I said? Get out!"

"Jordan! *Por Dios!*" Reva cried. She grabbed his arm and spoke to him in rapid Spanish. He was not listening to her, his eyes fixed on me in barely controlled violence.

"Your horse is out front waiting for you. If you aren't on it and off my ranch in five minutes, I won't be held responsible for what I do to you. Now, get out!"

Shaking, I ran through the house and down the front steps. I climbed on the gelding and urged him down the road toward the arch. Watered and fed, the horse responded to my direction.

About a mile down the road, I heard the thundering of a horse behind me. Turning to look back over my shoulder, I saw a black stallion with Bennett astride. I kicked hard at my mount. He bolted forward, more surprised by my

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sudden decisive action than agreement to follow my dictates. The stallion stretched out, easily catching up.

Bennett's hand came into my peripheral vision, and instinctively I twisted away not realizing he was reaching for the reins and not me. The stallion's presence, my turning motion, and Bennett's alarmed shout unnerved the gelding and it bucked to the side, sending me flying headlong through the air. I felt the sleeves of my dress rip as dirt and rock tore into my hands and forearms. The air was knocked out of me and I lay motionless, hearing but unable to move.

"Abby!"

Bennett swung down from his saddle in a fluid motion and came toward me. With an agility born of fear, I leaped to my feet, gasping for breath. Seeing my face, he stopped, and something flickered in his expression.

"Abby," Jordan said more calmly. I backed away from him, not trusting his anger.

Jordan moved slowly toward me, looking down at my hands. "We'll have to wash . . ."

"Leave me alone!" I flinched as he extended his hand.

He dropped his arm and looked at me. "Reva told me about your offer."

Tears of fright and temper burned behind my eyes. "You're insane, attacking me like that!"

"Look, dammit," he exploded, if you'd shut up long enough to listen, you'd hear me apologize!"

"It's all your fault!"

"What?" He looked blank.

"Everything! Everything!" I cried, thinking of James Olmstead and what he had told me about Diego.

"What in hell are you talking about?"

"Diego!"

Some of the anger went out of him. "I thought you'd said something to hurt him. I warned you. And I found him crying in the barn and then I heard Reva sobbing."

"I wouldn't do anything to hurt him. But you . . . . You knew what would happen, didn't you? You knew James Olmstead and his bigoted school board would find some flimsy excuse to expell him, didn't you? And you talk about *me* trying to hurt him. You're despicable! You're the most miserable human being I've ever met . . . including the . . ."

"Be quiet!" Bennett ordered tersely, a muscle jerking in his jaw.

"No! Not before I tell you what I think of you!"

"You've said enough. And you don't know what you're talking about!"

"I thought James Olmstead and Reverend Hayes were bad enough. But you're worse," I went on, too angry to think of caution anymore. "You knew what they would do to Diego, and you let it happen."

"Where Diego decides to go to school has nothing to do with me. He made the decision to try Sycamore Hill again. Where else could he go, for God's sake?"

"You ask me that?" I gasped. "You could have sent him anywhere. You have the money to see to his education."

"He's not my responsibility. And even if I did take it on, Reva is too proud a woman to accept any charity."

"Charity!" I stared at him horrified.

Across the gateway of my heart
I wrote "No Thoroughfare."
But love came laughing by, and cried:
"I enter everywhere."

Herbert Shipman
No Thoroughfare

"You're even worse than I thought. I can't imagine why Reva Gutierrez even remains in your employ. If it were me, I'd hate you!"

"My God! I can't make heads nor tails out of what you're saying!" Jordan said furiously. "Just tell me this. Will you teach Diego here at the ranch?"

"I'm not going to deny Diego his rights because his father is an insensitive, irresponsible brute!" I exclaimed. Bennett's face hardened into a granite mask.

"Someone told you Diego is my son, is that it?"

"Apparently it's common knowledge. You might as well do him the justice of acknowledging him!" I retorted, suddenly wanting to cry.

Jordan looked away, staring toward Sycamore Hill. Then he turned and strode toward his stallion. Mounting, he looked down at me coldly, something unfathomable passing across his eyes.

"Wait until they get around to telling you how I murdered my wife."

I stared aghast as he whirled the stallion around and rode at a hard gallop back to the ranch.

"Everyone believes that Jordan killed his wife," Ellen Greer answered my question with a disgusted snort. "People always want to believe the worst of others."

"Ellen . . ." I sighed.

"You got me on a sore subject, Abby. I love that boy."

"He's hardly a boy," I said dryly.

"I know. I haven't lost touch with him. He wrote to me regularly when he was studying back East, and he still drops by on occasion."

That was a side of that man I had never seen.

"I'm not blind to his faults, mind you. I know he has a foul, violent temper when he's aroused. It got him into trouble more than once in my school. But that was when he was a boy. He's got more control now."

I remembered the expression on his face when he had burst into the kitchen. How much in control had he been then?

"Even for a patient, placid man, Gwendolyn would have been a trial."

"That was her name . . . Gwendolyn?"

"Gwendolyn Bracklin-Reed, to be precise,"Ellen said in a mocking voice that clearly indicated her dislike for the dead woman. "One of the true-blue bloods of Boston, and she didn't want anyone to forget it." That, at least, could explain Jordan Bennett's prejudice against Bostonians.

"What did she look like?" I asked, wondering what kind of woman would attract Jordan Bennett. Ellen gave me a sharp look.

"So you're curious about Jordan's wife, are you?" Those shrewd eyes were alight with speculation.

"We can change the subject anytime you wish," I said stiffly.

Ellen waved her gnarled hand in reprimand. "Don't be so sensitive, girl, or I might just think you're protesting too much. Besides, it wouldn't do you any good if you were interested in Jordan. He's sworn off women. After Gwendolyn, who would blame him?"

"Why does Reva Gutierrez stay with him under such circumstances?"

"Reva?" Ellen's eyes opened wide in genuine surprise. "My heavens! Our little town magpies have been busy filling your ears, haven't they?" She leaned forward on her cane, one hand on top of the other. "Does Diego look like Jordan Bennett's son to you, Abby?"

I colored hotly. "I didn't mean to say he was."

Ellen clucked impatiently. "But that's what you were thinking. Abby, the next time you see Diego . . . you take a good, hard, long look at him. Then decide whether what the gos-

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sipmongers in this town say is true."

"He didn't deny it," I muttered unhappily.

Ellen looked astounded. "You mean you actually confronted him with that story? What in the world possessed you to do such a stupid thing?"

"I was upset about Diego and my temper got out of control."

Ellen sniffed. "People with tempers should fetter their tongues. Maybe you and Jordan have more in common than I thought. But I'll tell you this about him. He wouldn't admit or deny anything if his life depended on it. I think he takes amusement in watching people make complete jackasses out of themselves."

"He's done it often enough with me," I admitted. "From the first moment we met . . ."

"You never have told me about that," Ellen said.

"And I don't intend to," I said emphatically.

"Well, at least I got the story of the Haversalls out of you," Ellen chuckled. "Maybe Jordan will tell me about the other."

Ellen watched my face carefully. "We were getting around to talking of Gwendolyn, weren't we?"

"We don't have to," I said a little too casually.

"Well, I'm going to tell you all about her whether you like it or not. Gwendolyn Bennett was the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. The kind that makes a man fall head-over-heels in love and who also has the ability to make him feel he's her great protector. Men can be such fools. And Jordan is no exception. He took one look at that pair of violet eyes and the sense he was born with seeped right out his ears." She shook her head in disgust.

"I never thought he could be so bamboozled by a woman . . . or a man, for that matter. But he was. If anything good comes out of that marriage, it will be Linda. She inherited her mother's looks, but pray to God she didn't inherit anything else of hers."

"How did Mr. Bennett meet his wife?"

"At some big society dinner. He wanted her the first time he saw her, and when Jordan wants something, he goes after it. He didn't have to run very hard to get Gwendolyn, though. She heard that he had been offered a position with one of Boston's finest law firms and she saw money. Their marriage might have lasted if Jordan had stayed in Boston. But he didn't like the people or their rigid social codes. First chance he got, he packed her up and came back here where he belongs. I don't think she ever got over the shock of that, and she set out to make his life miserable."

Ellen looked out the back window where she could see her niece plucking bush beans. I waited, not wanting to admit to myself that I wanted to know all about Jordan Bennett.

"Gwendolyn had great plans for her life, and a ranch in California had no part in it," Ellen continued. "She didn't want to live here, and made no bones about it. Jordan wasn't about to let her tantrums drive him back East again. So it was an ongoing war between them with both the losers. She hated California. She hated the ranch. She hated the people here, and after a while I think she even grew to hate Jordan. She didn't care who knew it."

"But what about Linda?" I asked.

"Linda, it seems, was an unforeseen and unwelcome accident. Apparently, Gwendolyn got pregnant almost immediately after she and Jordan were married. She couldn't get rid of the baby fast enough once she was born. Reva took Linda to wet nurse."

"How did Mr. Bennett feel about that?"

Ellen made a grunt. "What do you think? He figured a surrogate mother was preferable to Gwendolyn's open hostility."

"No wonder the little girl is so withdrawn," I said almost to myself.

"She may not come to school now that Diego has been expelled," Ellen warned grimly.

"But surely . . ."

"She loves Diego. She'll more than likely refuse to come to school without him."

"And what about her father's opinion on that?" I asked.

"Jordan Bennett could teach Linda more than you and I put together. And since you've already so magnanimously offered to take care of Diego's education . . ."

"But it isn't just a question of learning from books, Ellen—Linda needs to be with other children."

"So does Diego. And Diego is like her flesh and blood brother. She'll be loyal to him. Do you see the position you've put yourself into, Abby? If the school board ever finds out you're giving Diego private instruction, you are very liable to lose your position."

"Are you trying to suggest I not tutor Diego?"

"I'm just saying you should weigh your actions very carefully. You can't change the world, my dear, and trying to do so might get you right out on your ear. Then what good would you be to anyone?"

"There are other positions," I said defensively.

"Spoken like a true idiot." Ellen did not spare my feelings. "And if you leave here, what good would you do to Diego Gutierrez? Would you tell me that?" She emitted a disgusted snort. "What a little fool you can be, my dear. Who would give you a reference? James Olmstead? Reverend Jonah Hayes? And what about the other thirty-odd children who need you? Diego is one boy. Will you let the others become illiterates so that you can play crusader?"

"There's no sense in arguing, Ellen." I said flatly. "I told Reva Gutierrez I would teach Diego, and I will. If I don't teach him, I will be condoning the school board's position."

Ellen leaned forward again. "It was misplaced loyalty that kept you with the Haversalls while they stole you blind. Look at what they did to you."

"This isn't the same thing!"

"No, it isn't. But just don't let your emotions rule you. Do what you have to do to keep your own self-respect, but be as quiet about it as a lamb in a lion's den."

I stood up to leave, asking as I did so if there was anything I could get for her. I got the customary sharp reply that anything she needed she could get up and get for herself. It had almost become a ritual.

"Ellen?" I said, pausing at the door. "What happened to Gwendolyn Bennett?"

"No one's sure. She died of a broken neck. Jordan said she fell, but the story was never really very clear. Old Tom Hallender, our sheriff, just let the incident drop without too many questions. He was busy trying to solve a robbery at the same time and people weren't pushing to hang anyone suspected of killing 'the princess,' as they

LULLABY FOR A LADY

By John Nixon, Jr.

Be the Queen of Sheba,
But may your caravan
Bear you to the tent of
A less judicious man
Than Solomon. Be Helen—
Who loved a local boy
And never winked at Paris
And never heard of Troy.
Be Guinevere sans *Arthur.*
Over the mythic sea,
Skirting the hero islands,
Dream your way home to me.

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called her. Nobody except Jordan mourned her."

"Then he did love her," I said quietly, feeling a pain knife through me.

"Maybe he still did. Or maybe he just loved what he thought she was the first time he laid eyes on her. Who knows?"

"I suppose Jordan Bennett is a hard man because he's had a hard life."

"No harder than anyone else around these parts, and a lot easier than some. He has been the cynosure of malicious gossip since Gwendolyn's death. You've heard most of it. Diego was another event for which he gained blame. They also credited him with what happened to Prudence . . . ." Ellen pressed her lips together tightly and looked out the window with an irritated expression.

"You mean Prudence Townsend?"

"It's all hogwash and not worth repeating."

"What happened to Prudence Townsend?" I asked, sitting back down, determined to get an answer. Ellen looked at me and shook her head.

"Nothing you'd want to know about, and nothing that would help you in the knowing," she said firmly.

I sat waiting, but she just looked at me. I sighed and rose again. "Besides you, does Jordan Bennett have any real friends in this town?"

"A few. Emily Olmstead for one, believe it or not. Maybe that's why James is so outspoken about the rumors surrounding Jordan. He always was a jealous little runt."

"Jordan and Emily Olmstead were talking the day I arrived at the general store."

"I'll lay you odds that James was nowhere in sight," Ellen snorted.

"As a matter of fact, he wasn't!"

Ellen started to chuckle.

"What's the matter?" I asked, curious.

"You called him Jordan. I thought you disliked the man."

I flushed. "I suppose your calling him by his Christian name rubbed off, that's all." Ellen was watching me with that pensive, sharp-eyed expression that sometimes unnerved me.

"What happened to your hands, by the way?" Ellen asked.

"I fell," I answered tersely.

"How and why?"

"My horse bolted and I fell off," I said, keeping to the truth without stating the embarrassing details.

"I don't believe you are telling me everything. Now out with it!" Ellen snapped like the old schoolmarm she was. "How did it happen, and what's it got to do with Jordan? I know it has something to do with him because of the course of our conversation this afternoon."

"I don't intend to go into it," I told her. "It was a needless accident."

"Did Jordan do that?" Ellen asked, distressed now and looking at me oddly.

"It happened exactly the way I told you."

"Well, then, you'd better learn how to sit your horse a little better."

I smiled reassuringly. "I'll be getting more practice," I told her, thinking of my weekly rides to Eden Rock to tutor Diego. I opened the door to leave.

"Abby . . ."

I turned back. Ellen looked disturbed as she watched me.

"Don't leave yourself open to hurt," she told me. "I think you're more vulnerable than you like to let on."

"I know what I'm doing," I smiled, thinking of the warning she had given me about the school board finding out about my tutoring.

"I wonder if you do. You might find more at Eden Rock than you can cope with."

A soft, mewling cry awakened me from an exhausted slumber. Pushing the cover back, I swung my legs off the narrow bed and touched bare feet to a cold, wooden floor. Slowly, I tiptoed across my room.

Again, the cry came, this time a desperate sound in the darkness. Opening the schoolroom door, I peered in. I saw a small, forlorn shadow against the front window and hurried across the deserted classroom. I slowly opened the front door of the schoolhouse.

Sitting precariously on the front windowsill was a small black cat. It yowled again, looking at me.

"What are you doing there?" I asked with a laugh. I judged the distance between railing and cat and realized it would be quite a stretch to reach the animal. The cat was eyeing me warily as I leaned toward her. My fingers brushed the fur slightly and it backed away. I had to stretch even further, finally managing to get the scruff of its neck. Just as I was lifting the light weight, the railing gave a loud crack. Yanking backwards, I just managed to catch my balance as the railing gave way and toppled into the blackness below the steps. I looked down: it was a good six feet to the hard ground.

"That was close," I laughed shakily, stroking the cat's head with trembling fingers. An awesome thought struck me. Had someone tampered with that railing and deliberately put the cat there?

The cat snuggled tightly against my chest. Surely this animal had come to me by chance. "What were you doing up in that window and how did you get there?"

The small, scrawny black cat mewed again, as I set her down. I rummaged through my small cupboard. The cat meowed plaintively and pressed itself against my legs. Pouring some milk into a saucer, I pinched off pieces of bread to soak and put it on the floor. I sat down and watched the cat lap up the milk and gulp down the sodden bread.

"Pretty hungry, aren't you?" I stroked the soft fur. "You're welcome to stay. I've plenty of room. There's no one else but the owl, the crickets, and me until the children come for school in the morning, and they'll be delighted to see you here."

The cat arched its back against my hand and I scratched it. It made an ecstatic sound deep in its throat.

"What shall I call you? How about Orphan? You look neglected enough to be one," I said, continuing to pet. The cat purred on. Somehow, the presence of the small, stray cat seemed to ease the loneliness.

It was Monday again and before anybody else arrived, Bennett walked into the classroom, holding Linda by the hand.

"Good morning," he said. "Linda has been feeling under the weather for the past few days." He gave his daughter a smile that drew a blush into pale cheeks. Linda said hello politely and walked to her seat. Bennett turned back to me. "I wanted to know if you'd changed your mind."

"About what?"

"About teaching Diego. I figured by now you might have learned what a predicament you've put yourself in with that impetuous offer. You make a habit of saying things before you think them through." I was reminded of my accusation about him being Diego's father and flushed slightly.

"I assure you I had more than ample time to think things through on the six-mile ride to your ranch." I smiled tightly. "Put your mind at ease, Mr. Bennett. I shall ride out to the ranch tomorrow, and Diego and I will begin his lessons then."

He muttered a colorful expletive under his breath. "Have you no sense at all? Will you at least give thinking a

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try, Miss McFarland?"

"I have thought, Mr. Bennett. The boy deserves an education. Why should you object to my offer?"

"I'm not thinking about Diego at the moment."

"There isn't anyone else to think about!" I said, exasperated. "You ask me if I intend to keep my promise to Reva Gutierrez and Diego. Well, I do. And you have already implied you will not welcome me on the ranch. After what I said to you a few days ago, I can understand. I spoke in anger. And I'm sorry. But can't we try to put our grievances aside for the benefit of the boy?"

"You bull-headed little bitch!" he breathed in frustration. "You're going to find yourself in a real mess if you persist. Why don't you heed the warning you were given?"

His words suddenly reminded me of the scrawled message on the blackboard. Perhaps that message was not just a child's prank. "Why are you looking at me like that?" Bennett asked, frowning.

"Are you still hoping I'll leave town?" I asked, gauging his expression.

He raked his fingers back through his hair. "Do what you want. I don't give a tinker's damn." With that, he strode out of the schoolhouse.

My ride to Eden Rock was easier the second time. Charles Studebaker kept Jordan's gelding for me, but I insisted on paying the feed expenses, and when I returned from Bennett's ranch I kept the horse overnight in the schoolyard so that he could munch away at the tall grass around the building. On this ride I wore gloves and kept tight control on the reins. My determination won and the horse walked into the yard with a disgruntled snort, stopping at the railing in front of the house.

Diego came running out on the front steps, a bright smile on his brown face. "Miss McFarland! I was afraid you weren't coming. It's near eleven!"

"Surely you didn't think I was going to play hooky," I teased.

"Mama is waiting for us in the kitchen. She has a surprise for you."

"A surprise . . . for me?"

"*Si . . . si*," he said excitedly. "Something *muy especial*. Linda helped her make it this morning while I watched." I followed him into the house.

This time I was more relaxed and able to admire the rich interior, with its provincial furniture obviously chosen by a woman. Except for the massive stone fireplace, the living room, done in exquisite taste, might have been taken from the Haversalls' Boston mansion.

Passing a dining room, I noted a silver tea service on a trolley and a china cabinet displaying an exquisite set of porcelain, delicately hand-painted with China-blue flowers. Ellen Greer must have been mistaken in her evaluation of Gwendolyn Bracklin-Reed Bennett. No woman would have so carefully filled a home with such treasures if she hated it and the man who inhabited it with her.

When I entered the kitchen, Reva took my hand. "I am so happy you came back. I am sorry about our last meeting. I was unjust. You are not like the others at all. Jordan was very sorry about losing his temper with you."

I shook my head, smiling. "There's no need for you to apologize. It was all a misunderstanding."

Reva Gutierrez seemed determined to explain. "Diego went to school once before. He was expelled then also. The other teacher was not like you. She did not have the courage to go against the others." Reva smiled at me tentatively. "I have made this in honor of you." She pointed to the table. On it was a magnificent cake with bright, decorative icing.

"It's the most beautiful cake I've ever seen," I said truthfully.

"We will have cake with coffee after my son's lessons," Reva said.

I had brought several books with me as well as worksheets and writing materials. I assigned enough to keep him busy for the week, keeping him up with the same assignments that I had given the others at his level. But Diego was hungry for more, and I knew that I would have to go at a quicker pace with him. He needed more materials and books. I thought of asking Bennett if Diego could use the books I had seen in the living room. But it might make things even more difficult between us if I were to dare ask him a favor.

Diego walked out with me to the front of the house. Tying my skirt, I mounted the horse and gave Diego a wave as I drew around.

I was well across the yard when a familiar voice hailed me. Reluctantly I drew in and waited.

"I noticed the horse was tied to the front railing this time," Bennett taunted as he came up to stand next to me.

I flushed and said, "Yes, well, I made sure he had plenty to eat before we left town this morning." I managed to sound calm but my heart was doing calisthenics as it always did whenever I looked at him. "Who do you suppose is responsible for keeping the schoolyard trimmed to the ground?" I asked, smiling slightly. He laughed. My senses stumbled to a stop and then lurched forward again. He looked so young and reckless when he laughed like that. His eyes were bright, all their usual mockery and hostility gone. I wished my pulse would slow down.

"How long did it take you to ride out here this morning?"

"A-About two hours," I answered warily. His mouth had tightened fractionally and there was an odd glimmer in those blue eyes.

"Did anyone see you leaving town?"

"I didn't pay any attention," I answered truthfully. "Should I have been looking over my shoulder the whole way?" My attempt at lightness irritated him.

"That might not have been such a bad idea."

"If anyone had asked me, I would have said I was taking a ride," I told him, realizing that he was worried that someone would stop me from teaching Diego.

"For seven hours?" he snorted. "What are you going to say when you're asked about that, Miss McFarland? Or why the schoolhouse isn't spotless and disinfected for the coming school week?"

"What makes you think the schoolhouse isn't spotless, Mr. Bennett? You may inspect it any time you like."

"Anytime . . . ?" His amused expression made the color flood my cheeks.

"When did you find time to clean that old haunt?" he asked after a disturbing study of my red face.

"I'm an early riser," I answered tautly. "I'm sure I'm keeping you from your work, Mr. Bennett. So if you will excuse me . . ." I loosened the reins in my stiff fingers. His hand came up and covered mine, pushing them down onto the saddlehorn. His other hand rested on the cantle. He was much too close for my liking.

"I suppose trying to warn you again about letting anyone know you are coming here is useless. You always do the opposite of what you are told to do."

"Maybe it's how I'm told," I said coolly. "And I think it's time I said good day." Bennett recaptured my hands in one easy movement, and when I tried to pull away, his fingers tightened painfully.

"Not so fast," he said under his

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breath. "You don't dismiss me like one of your students." He moved his other hand from the cantle.

"What are you doing?" I gasped in alarm as I felt his hand slide beneath my skirt and curve tightly around my ankle.

"You have slender ankles," he commented with a smile. "What's the matter, Miss McFarland? Haven't you ever been touched by a man before?"

"Let me go," I managed through the constriction in my chest. My voice sounded raspy with tension.

Jorden Bennett's hand moved upward to the smooth skin of my calf. "I'll bet you're soft all over."

"I'm not very good at parlor games, Mr. Bennett," I answered shaking.

"If that's the case, perhaps you'd better stay away from Eden Rock." His grin became even broader. "However, since you've promised to see to Diego's lessons every Saturday, you've made that virtually impossible."

"I can't see how things could have worked out any differently from the way they have," I said stiffly. "What I do with my Saturdays should be my own concern . . . not the school board's or yours, Mr. Bennett."

"The schoolmistress is to mirror the opinions and dictates of the school board," Jordan said.

"Even if I don't happen to agree with them?" I snapped, my voice higher than normal.

"You should keep your disagreements to yourself. It'd be good practice in self-control."

I ignored the glint in his eyes. "And what about Diego?"

"What about Diego?" he demanded.

"You know very well what I mean," I retorted.

"A protest could have been leveled against the board's decision."

"By whom?" I asked wryly. "You?"

"You can be very insulting, did you know that?" he said, his eyes narrowing unpleasantly. "Don't you think I'd fight for my own son, Miss McFarland?" he went on sarcastically, his face hard as his temper rose.

"I'm not trying to interfere—"

"It's a little late for that," he interrupted. "You made a promise to the boy, and I'm going to see that you keep it."

"That's entirely unnecessary," I said, stung. "I don't make a habit of breaking promises."

"Then you'll be the first woman I've known that doesn't."

"That doesn't say much for the women you've known, Mr. Bennett," I retorted. He laughed derisively.

"I've known quite a few."

I liked that statement even less than all the others put together. "Well, you don't know me."

Jordan Bennett looked at me, allowing his eyes to move slowly over my face, lingering for an instant on my mouth and then trailing down to dwell on my breasts rising and falling with indignation.

"Not yet, perhaps, Miss McFarland," he smiled slowly.

"Not ever," I asserted definitively and encouraged the gelding to move out.

"Don't count on that, " Bennett's assured voice came from behind me, turning quickly to a mocking laugh.

The next week was one of the happiest I'd known at Sycamore Hill. I told the children that I was proud of them for working so hard and decided to give them a Halloween Party. It was a great success, complete with bobbing for apples, paper skeletons, jack o' lanterns and other games. The children's pleasure and their appreciation of the party made me feel my struggles were worthwhile. Dismissing school, I stood listening gratefully to the laughter. Only Linda remained, patiently waiting for her father to come for her. I began taking the streamers down, carefully winding them around my hand so that I could save them for next year . . . if I were still here.

Stopping my work for a moment, I shifted around to look at Linda. She had been the only child who had seemed somewhat restrained during the party.

"I wish Diego could have been here today," she said quietly.

"So do I, Linda," I admitted. "Maybe you can do some of the games at home with him. I have some extra construction paper you can take with you, and you can show him how we made black cats and witches."

"It wouldn't be the same." She shook her head, and I sat down beside her.

"I know," I said, reaching out to hold her hand. She looked up with tear-filled eyes.

"Why did they make him leave? It wasn't Diego's fault that Matt hates him. Why didn't they kick him out too? It's just not fair! It's not!" Tears ran down her cheeks, and I drew her against me.

"I know it isn't. But sometimes things happen that aren't fair, and there's little we can do about it."

"But why?" she looked up at me, her mouth quivering.

"I wish I knew what to tell you, sweetheart," I whispered. How could I explain bigotry and racial prejudice to a child?

"Tell her what?" Bennett said from the doorway.

"We were talking about Diego, Daddy," Linda answered for me. She ran to her father, wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him. He stroked her blond head tenderly, but he looked straight across the room at me.

"It's all rather hard to explain, isn't it, Miss McFarland?" he asked in a low voice that for once held no criticism or mockery.

"Maybe the world would be better if left in the hands of children," I said.

"Innocent children? You mean like little Matthew Hayes?"

"I understand how you feel about him, Mr. Bennett. But I honestly don't believe he intended Diego to be expelled. He was jealous and overly competitive."

"Give this to your teacher, honey." Bennett gave a bag to Linda. "From Reva and Diego. Look at them."

Opening the bag, I took out a small white sugar skull decorated with colored frosting and bright tinsel.

"*Calaveras*," Bennett said, and I looked at him in distress.

"Am I supposed to eat them? Why, they look like skulls!"

"They are—*calaveras* means skulls. Don't look so appalled, Miss McFarland. The *calaveras* are meant as a treat in honor of *el dia de los muertos*."

"Pardon me?" I said blankly, uncomprehending. "I'm afraid I don't speak any Spanish."

"The Day of the Dead."

"Really," I breathed, then swallowed.

"It's a Mexican holiday that coincides with All Saints' Day."

"I'm not acquainted with All Saints' Day," I admitted.

"You aren't a Roman Catholic."

"Are you?" I asked without thinking.

"Oh, no, Miss McFarland," Linda volunteered. "Daddy doesn't go to church anymore. We used to go . . . before Reverend Hayes came—"

"Linda . . ." Jordan cut in warningly.

"You are a very wise man, Mr. Bennett," I said candidly. His brows gave a quick jerk upward. Then he smiled slowly and gave a soft laugh.

"Do I detect agreement on one thing at least?"

"Surprisingly enough." Then I drew my eyes away from his. "Don't forget your pictures of the witch and cat, Linda."

"I won't," Linda said and went to

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take them down from the wall.

"*El dia de los meurtos* is a holiday much like Easter is to us, Miss McFarland," Bennett said as though reading my thoughts. "We drink and eat of Christ's blood and body with our holy communion. That could be taken as gruesome to anyone who didn't understand the significance behind the service."

"Yes. I hadn't thought of that," I said, deciding to ask Reva about the holiday.

"People tend to fear and hate what they don't understand," he added.

"People, too?" Linda asked perceptively.

"People, too, honey," he answered while looking at me. I realized that he had used the opportunity to somehow answer part of Linda's question concerning Diego.

Standing on the steps, I watched Bennett and Linda ride away. There were so many things about that man that I did not understand. It was absurd, but I felt happy that he had lingered long enough to explain a Mexican holiday to me. The conversation had been brief but unstrained. It should not matter if he liked me. What should matter was my relationship with his daughter. But the fact was, it seemed increasingly important to me that Jordan Bennett like me. And I was afraid to acknowledge just how important it was.

The following morning as dawn was breaking, I pushed aside the covers and opened the door to my room. I saw Orphan stretch from her tightly curled sleeping position and cast a disgruntled look in my direction.

"Good morning, you little beggar," I said cheerfully. "Sorry if I disturbed Your Majesty, but I've got to get an early start to Eden Rock if I want to be back here by two to clean the schoolhouse."

Orphan, now well-nourished and overindulged with affection, stepped sedately from her sleeping quarters in my commode drawer and glided across the room to rub against me.

"Your milk is warmed and in a dish next to the stove, lazy bones," I told the purring animal who stretched up its neck for a scratch. I smiled slightly as I thought what people would think if they could hear me talking to the animal in the lonely hours after the children had gone home.

I had promised the blacksmith I would lend him *A Tale of Two Cities*. I put it in with the texts and materials I was taking to Diego Gutierrez, and skipped down the back steps and walked quickly around the schoolhouse and out through the front gate. The autumn air was crisp and there was a sweet, dewy moisture in the air.

Feeling ridiculously happy, I walked with a swing to my skirts, smiling to myself. Sycamore Hill was becoming home to me. I was still having my tussles with James Olmstead. I still carefully plotted my Bible study so that the fire-breathing Reverend Hayes could find no cause for complaint. But I was also making friends. Emily Olmstead, in spite of her husband's discouragement, always greeted me cheerfully and chattered inanely but entertainingly. Charles Studebaker was a friendly acquaintance, and Reva Gutierrez and Diego were still slightly in awe of me, but that would gradually fade.

Passing by the boarding house, I looked up and thought with special fondness of Ellen Greer, my closest friend in town. My closest friend in all my life. The old lady was often difficult, but she offered me stimulating companionship for at least one short visit each week.

The horse was saddled and waiting for me in front of the stables. Charles Studebaker, covered in his work apron, was pulling a red-hot horseshoe from his forge. He looked up and saw me.

"Morning, ma'am," he called, coming out of the shed toward me.

"Good morning." I held out the Dickens novel to him and he took it, smiling warmly at me.

"You remembered."

"Of course." I grinned.

"What else you got in the saddle bag?" he asked.

"Books," I answered as I managed to get astride. I had altered one skirt into a culotte for riding. It was not the most ladylike way to travel, but I did not have the time, nor inclination, to learn to use a sidesaddle.

"Looks like you got quite a few in there," he observed. "You going anywhere in particular?"

"Just riding," I said, remembering Ellen's and Bennett's warnings. "I thought I'd do some school lessons this morning."

"Someplace where it's quiet, you mean," Studebaker said, "and there's no chance of interruption."

"Yes."

"Well, you be mighty careful, ma'am. It's a big country out there. You can get lost in a hurry."

"I've been here over two months now, Mr. Studebaker. I know a few landmarks."

"Then I won't start worrying until dark," he said and gave me a brief wave.

I enjoyed the morning ride as I turned west and rode through the flat meadow that preceded the rolling hills. Meadowlarks sang, while sparrows dipped and soared. Once I even spotted a tall-eared jack rabbit bounding for cover in the tall, pale grasses.

When I arrived at the ranch, Reva greeted me. She said that Bennett was breaking horses, and Diego loved to watch. Together, we walked to the corral. Reva stepped up onto the fence railing to watch the scene. I moved next to her and gasped as I saw a huge sorrel stallion rear on its hind legs and paw furiously at the air while twisting its head fiercely against the bit. Jordan Bennett was astride and grinning like the very devil.

Coming down onto all fours again, the stallion bucked back and forth, twisting frantically to remove the man from his back. Jordan moved with the horse easily, shifting his weight to maintain his expert balance. He seemed part of the animal, even his expression mirroring the wild, untamed will as his arm rose and fell with the movement of the stallion.

Moving closer, I stared through the rails of the fence, fascinated. Horse and rider bolted closer and I jumped back, sure the two were going to pitch right over the railing on top of me. For just an instant, Bennett's narrowed eyes caught my rounded ones. The stallion, sensing his rider's momentary lapse of attention, whirled suddenly to the side and sent Jordan heaving through the air into the dust.

"Jordan!" I cried, pulling myself up on the railing next to Reva. My heart lodged in my throat as I stared down, sure that I would see him broken and dead in the dust. But he was up almost at once. Dusting himself off with his hat, he glared at the prancing, snorting horse as ranch hands needled him.

"Hey, boss. That ain't like you to get tossed like a babe," one shouted in friendly banter.

"The sorrel isn't as easy as you thought, aye, Mr. Bennett?" another called.

Several men had already jumped down from the fence to help Bennett trap the furious animal. One man made a leap and grabbed the stallion's rearing head, reaching hastily up to hold tightly to the ear. The horse made a lunge, tossing the man up but unable to break him loose. The bared teeth snapped shut. The other cow-

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boys held tightly to the saddle while their boss vaulted up again. The three ranch hands let go at once and made a run for the fence before the infuriated animal could trample them.

More cheers broke the quiet morning air. Bennett's face was fierce with determination. He never once glanced my way again, and I felt curiously hurt. I prayed that he would not be killed and suddenly without the least doubt I knew that I loved him.

The contest between man and animal continued, with neither gaining. The magnificent stallion snorted, pawed, bucked and kicked to be free of the man now again grinning with obvious enjoyment of the animal's spirited challenge. Once I thought the stallion intended to ram his rider against the fence, but turned back as Bennett whipped the reins into his hindquarters, making him veer away.

Tiring, the stallion reared again and again, but lower each time. Then he began to gallop in wider circles around the corral. Bennett let the horse have its head and after a while drew in the reins slowly but firmly. The animal slowed and finally came to a prancing stop.

Still maintaining his masterful hold, Bennett pulled back slowly. The stallion snorted fiercely and yanked hard, but was unable to break the man's grip. Then, the horse stepped back trying to ease the pull on its mouth. One step and then another. It was what Jordan wanted, and, satisfied, he loosened the reins slightly, pressing his knees against the stallion's sweating sides.

The stallion moved forward again, controlled and heeding the rider's signals. Jordan rode the horse around the corral again several times and then finally drew the animal in and dismounted. I expected him to look exhausted, but he looked invigorated, blue eyes shining as he swept the perspiration from his brow with the back of his hand.

The animal was breathing hard and shook its head, showing that its spirit was still intact, though curbed by this one man. Moving to the stallion's head, Bennett dug into his pocket and pulled out some treat for the animal. I held my breath again, expecting the stallion to take a couple of fingers along with it. But the animal's nostrils quivered and it accepted the lump of sugar, allowing its soft nose to be stroked. I breathed again. Smiling, I felt proud of Bennett, even knowing I had no right to feel that way.

"Miss McFarland," Diego called, jumping down from the top rail of the fence and running around the corral toward me. "I'm sorry I did not meet you, but I did not want to miss this." The boy's dark eyes were sparkling with excitement. "Someday, I'm going to break such a horse . . . just like that one. And it will be mine!"

Linda climbed down from the fence and came up behind Diego, touching his arm. "Diego, may I study with you and Miss McFarland?" she asked timidly, a soft expression in her violet eyes. Diego looked at her and his chin jerked up, giving him an arrogant look.

"Do your lessons with the other gringos in town," he said, and I stared at him in shocked surprise. Linda's chin quivered, warning of tears.

Reva's face lost its smile. "Diego! You will apologize to Linda."

Linda turned away and ran across the yard. Diego paid no attention to his mother, but he watched in obvious remorse as Linda disappeared around the side of the ranch house.

"Diego!" Reva said more sternly. "Jordan has been kind to us and you will not treat his daughter in such an unthinking way. It is not Linda who pushed you from school but the others."

Diego seemed to let out his breath, the anger and bitterness of a moment before gone. He looked toward the garden. "*Si,* Mama," he said and began to walk away in the direction Linda had gone. He seemed suddenly older than his thirteen years.

"My son has a right to be bitter," Reva said defensively.

"He will be a better man if he overcomes it," I said softly. Reva sighed.

"It's not easy for a boy to understand the injustices of people," she said in a hoarse voice. "Come, I will show you where Diego and I live while the two *niños* make up."

I accepted Reva's invitation to her room and was surprised at how modest the quarters she and Diego inhabited were. I had expected Jordan to provide her with more.

Her room was pleasant enough and far larger than my own. It was painted ivory and draped with lacy curtains and panels of thicker brocade. It was well equipped with functional furnishings. Late roses on the lattice just outside the window filled the room with sweet fragrance.

Pictures on the wall were embroidered and framed in plain polished wood. A large braided rug lay over the spotless wooden floor. A long low table covered with a white cloth embroidered with brilliant colors was placed in front of the windows. An exquisitely carved white stone crucifix stood in the middle of the table with a photograph on either side. The one on the right showed a man standing behind a woman who was sitting on the ground with a child at her feet. I recognized Bennett immediately with his head of tawny, sun-bleached hair and those magnificent light eyes. He was tall and lanky and looked no more than fourteen.

Reva picked up the picture. "Jordan's father," her finger moved to the woman, "and his mother." She indicated the photograph on the right. "This is my father and mother."

"Were you and Mr. Bennett both only children?"

"I had two sisters and a brother. My two sisters died in infancy. My brother, Raoul, died when he was ten. I was only three then and I remember almost nothing about him."

"How very sad . . ."

"It was not uncommon for families to lose so many children. Measles took many. Fevers, dysentery, even hunger . . ." Reva carefully set the picture back on the altar. "It was different for Señor and Señora Bennett. The Señora confided a great deal to my mama. They were friends. My mother was strong and used to hard work. The Señora was frail. She was kind to the people who helped her. She was a great lady. Nothing like that woman Jordan brought home with him from Boston," Reva said. "It's hard to believe with a mother such as Jordan had he could have married Gwendolyn. You've heard about her?"

"Yes . . . I've heard a few things."

"Never have I met a more arrogant woman . . . nor hated one so much. She came when Diego was just a little boy and hated Diego because Jordan loved him. Gwendolyn Bennett was jealous of anyone Jordan loved." Reva's dark eyes began to lose their anger and glittered with anguish. "She called us an embarrassment. She wanted to send us away, but before she came, people thought I was married. Now they know about Diego, and it is one more thing they use to hurt him."

"I'm sorry," I said helplessly.

"We have lived here so long," Reva said wistfully. "My mama did the cooking, canning, cleaning for Jordan's mama. The Señora did her sewing. She loved to sew. She taught me to do this work." Reva fingered the exquisite embroidery.

"It's beautiful."

"I will never have the art of the Señora," Reva said reverently. "But I try.

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She did such beautiful things. Once she made me a white ruffled dress for my confirmation. She embroidered pink rosebuds all around the hem. I loved that dress," she smiled. "I still have it packed away in case I ever have a daughter. The Señora was greatly admired. She would have liked to have had more children."

"Why didn't she?" I asked.

"The Señor and Señora lived apart."

"You mean they didn't love each other?"

"Oh, no. They loved one another very much. But Jordan was a large baby and the Señora was a delicate woman. She had great pain in childbirth and almost died. She was afraid of having another baby, and the doctor said she would probably die if she did. So she did not sleep with her husband."

My face burned with embarrassment at Reva Gutierrez's intimate disclosure about Jordan's parents. Reva smiled.

"I had forgotten how innocent you are."

"I'm not totally lacking in knowledge about the facts of life," I said.

"You mustn't admit that to the school board," Reva said teasingly. "They might think your great knowledge will corrupt the innocent children."

"It seems absurd. What is acceptable for other people to feel and know is denied to me because I am a teacher."

"If you had other interests besides teaching, you would not give your all to the children," Reva said firmly. "That's as it should be. If you had a family, you would not have time to teach. Your husband and your children would demand your time, and you would willingly give it to them rather than others. That is why it is best to have a spinster teacher . . . no one else demands her loyalties or efforts. All is for the children's education and betterment."

Reva's explanation emphasized the lonely barrenness of my life stretching before me. I was no different from other women. I dreamed of a family of my own, a man I could love, and children I would bear for him out of our love. Now, the children were becoming more and more my life. Through them I had purpose.

"Of course, that does not mean that a virtuous woman like you cannot burn with desire if the right man touches you," Reva continued, giving me a sidelong glance. "Do you burn for anyone, Señorita?"

"I should say not," I retorted, unable to prevent a picture of Jordan Bennett from forming in my mind. Reva laughed.

"How very red you can get, Señorita. You embarrass too easily. I was only teasing you." She considered me for a long moment then and a speculative gleam changed her dark eyes.

"Where is Diego?" I asked. "We should start our lesson." I was afraid of what Reva might say next.

Reva laughed. "Oh, he'll be along, Señorita." As she spoke, Diego came into the room and gratefully I began his lesson. In a little while I became totally absorbed in teaching the boy and forgot about my conversation with his mother. I let the lesson go on longer than usual—by the time I left, the sun was beginning to set, and when I got back to town, darkness had fallen.

When I came down over the hill and saw the schoolhouse, I was struck by the silence; it was so quiet my ears hurt. Inside, my room seemed colder than the night air outside. Rubbing my arms, I moved to the wood stove and added wood to the glowing embers.

A sound from the schoolroom drew my attention. Those mice, I thought with annoyance. Perhaps I would have to find myself a better hunter to team with my stray.

Opening the schoolroom door slowly, I peered in. The cold air in the room hit me almost physically, raising an army of goosebumps. No movement. No sound. Intense, ear-ringing silence greeted me. And that chill. What had made the noise, I wondered. And why was it so cold in this room?

As I started to turn back to my room something caught the corner of my eye. There was another message on the blackboard. Two words were written in a hand neater than the other. *Go away.*

Simple and direct, I thought wryly. I muttered an impatient sound and picked up the eraser.

But there was something else!

The smell of lavender. It permeated the room, strong and cloying. I was panting in alarm, but I turned slowly and stared around the darkened room. No one was there. No one at all.

Then there was a faint, moaning sound, as though someone were crying with his face muffled in a pillow. A sudden gust of wind blew the patchwork curtains into the room, whipping them about wildly for an instant. Then they lay still. And the scent of lavender was gone.

I went back to my room, now uncomfortably warm. Orphan scratched at the door, letting out a summoning cry. When I let her in, she rubbed herself against my skirt as usual.

The ghost of Prudence Townsend, I thought suddenly. Why would nobody tell me what happened to her? I stopped my thoughts, telling myself they were ridiculous. I must have imagined the moaning and the smell of lavender. Everything was in its place and there were the usual night sounds outside. What had frightened me moments ago and filled me with frightful dread? But no amount of reasoning stilled my fears. It was hours before I went to sleep.

During the week that followed I tried not to think about the strange happening in the schoolhouse. But after the children left and I had gone to bed it was difficult if not impossible and twice that week I again heard a woman crying. I had not dared to leave my bed to investigate.

"You're looking tired, Abby," Ellen Greer observed during our Wednesday afternoon visit three weeks after I had become aware of something strange going on in the schoolhouse.

"I haven't been sleeping well," I said simply.

"What's on your mind?"

"Lots of things, I suppose."

"Don't brush me off, girl. What is it?"

"Ghosts and goblins, actually," I said. "They're making too much noise in the schoolhouse to allow me a good night's sleep. Were you bothered by noises in the schoolroom, Ellen?"

"I can't say that I was, but then I was so tired by the end of the day that nothing could have awakened me."

"Maybe I'm overtired, but I honestly have come to believe there's a ghost living in the schoolhouse."

Ellen Greer did not seem the least bit surprised. But perhaps at eighty she was past the age of surprise.

"You don't think I'm crazy?" I asked with a laugh.

"No, I've lived in that schoolhouse," she said quietly. "I know how eerie it can be sometimes with the owls hooting and the crickets making their infernal racket. Your imagination draws demons out of little nothings, especially when you're exhausted. When you're all by yourself, sounds become magnified and distorted."

I nodded in agreement and we went on to talk of other things. Ellen said tartly that in her time there were live men around that were a lot more dangerous than imaginary ghosts. Two

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decades before, three gunmen had come into town. The aging local sheriff, Tom Hallender, had been only a deputy then. The sheriff had left town, afraid for his life and Tom had been forced to face the gunmen alone when they broke into a local establishment and raped a woman. A ferocious gunfight took place on Main Street. Hallender, a deadly accurate shot, had wound up the victor but not before suffering several wounds. He had killed two of the gunmen and wounded the third who was subsequently jailed. Hallender recovered quickly from most of his wounds but never completely from one that shattered his kneecap. Today he was often in pain and he limped.

"He doesn't look like a man with such courage," I said, thinking of the lean man with thinning gray hair and placid gray eyes.

"Perhaps he isn't today," Ellen said wryly. "Two years ago, three men killed a bank teller and robbed the bank of one hundred thousand dollars. Hallender went after them but his story is that he found only one man—dead. As for the dead man, Hallender said the other two must have murdered him when he started to slow them down. The dead man had been wounded during the robbery."

I winced. "Were the other two ever found?"

"No. The two who got away were a pair called the Woodland brothers. They were recognized by one of the tellers and they had been responsible for robberies in the Oakland area and points north of here."

"That was two years ago," I said. "Have they robbed anyone else since then?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Ellen said. "But I don't know why they'd bother. A hundred thousand dollars ought to carry them a long way. But to get back to your ghost for a moment, Abby. I suspect someone is playing an elaborate Halloween trick on you."

I shook my head, meeting her eyes. "I doubt it, Ellen. No child is up and around during those hours of the night and I can hear a woman crying. What is so wrong in believing in ghosts? You go to church and believe in Heaven and Hell—well, don't we have to have some form when we die?"

Ellen snorted, shook her head, and looked at me like a worn but still patient parent. " 'From ashes to ashes, dust to dust'—that's what I believe in. What man is worth a hereafter, anyway? The memory of what we were like during our life on earth is as much as we can expect. God created us, perhaps, but I'm inclined to believe he regretted that mistake. My dear, Heaven and Hell are right here." She tapped her cane hard on the floor. "Your loneliness is part of your Hell. Seeing your students learning is part of your Heaven. And as for my attending church like a faithful follower, it's my only social activity of the week."

She chuckled. "Hayes is a pompous, ignorant baboon, but he's entertaining to watch. I relish the way he shouts himself red in the face. He scares the very mischief out of the weak-hearted. Did you see Berthamae's face last Sunday when Hayes howled about the sins of idle gossip?"

I knew that Ellen was trying to distract me from my thoughts. but she only succeeded in increasing my curiosity about the spirit in the schoolhouse.

"There is something there in the schoolhouse, Ellen," I said stubbornly.

Ellen's mouth tightened. "There isn't anything in that schoolhouse now that hasn't been there since it was built fifty-odd years ago," she said.

"Did Prudence Townsend leave because of the ghost?"

"No. Prudence Townsend did not leave because of any ghost," Ellen retorted indignantly. She did not meet my eyes, however, but looked away from me and out into the garden.

"Then why did she leave?" I asked, still pressing the subject.

"Leave me be on the subject of Prudence Townsend," Ellen snapped, her eyes swinging back to me. I saw with surprise that she was really angry, angrier than I had ever seen her.

"That girl was a damn fool, plain and simple. Now, just forget about her."

I knew I could not. But I would not bring up the subject of Prudence Townsend with Ellen again. I would have to find other sources of information.

Trouble seemed to rest on my shoulders. As long as my ideas remained in opposition with James Olmstead and the Reverend Jonah Hayes, there was little I could do to alleviate the growing tension of my life.

I had earned Reverend Hayes's eternal ire by refusing to teach the stories he selected in Sunday school. Angry and frustrated, Reverend Hayes said that the children were not getting the proper attitude about God's power. They should fear His wrath, he said. I argued that everyone should live with the knowledge of His love and forgiveness. He cited passages from the Bible and I did likewise, which only increased his distrust and dislike of me.

With the antagonism between me and Olmstead and Hayes, I knew it would be difficult to have Diego Gutierrez reinstated in school. However, I intended to try as much for his sake as for Matthew Hayes's, since the latter was in disgrace with his classmates. When Matthew came to me in tears, I decided I would have to act.

The following Friday afternoon, I went to the general store. James Olmstead was perched precariously on a tall ladder rearranging some canned goods. Below him, arms crossed and talking leisurely, stood Reverend Hayes.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," I said pleasantly enough. Hayes gave me his usual imperious look. Olmstead mumbled a greeting. He continued to work, obviously hoping I would go away.

"I wish to speak with both of you about the reinstatement of Diego Gutierrez in school," I opened bluntly.

Reverend Hayes's frightening eyes chilled.

Olmstead issued an impatient snort. "When are you going to leave that alone, Miss McFarland?" he said tiredly.

"I'm afraid I cannot do that. Diego was expelled more than a month ago for a minor incident—"

"Minor incident!" Reverend Hayes boomed. "You call my son's bloody nose a minor incident?"

"Diego Gutierrez suffered a blackened eye which swelled shut, Reverend Hayes," I said quietly.

"He deserved it," he stated in a loud voice. "That little Mexican devil was beating up my son for no reason. He deserved to get a black eye. He deserved a good hiding as well and if you were doing your job properly, Miss McFarland, you would have used the switch on him in front of the children so that they would all know what happens to bullies."

"Diego did not beat up your son."

"That's not what I was told!" he stormed.

"I know that. However, I was informed by several of the children who witnessed the entire affair that it was Matthew who hit Diego first."

"My son said Diego Gutierrez started the fight," Hayes insisted stiffly.

"And if you discussed the episode with him now, I believe you would find his story different. Matthew is under a

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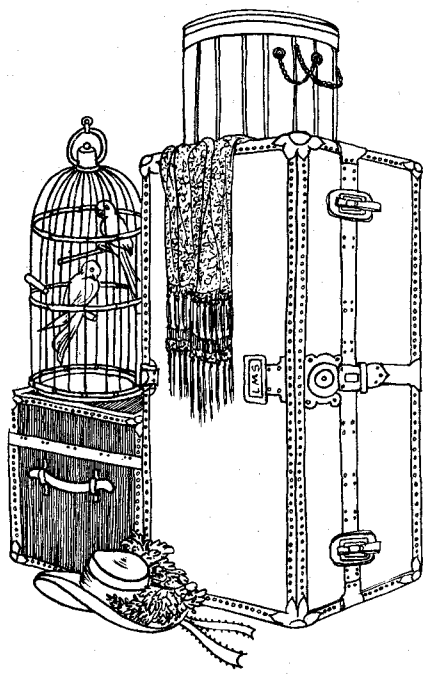

great deal of strain. He is suffering from a guilty conscience and social pressure. He used you and Mr. Olmstead to finish a fight he started and could not finish successfully. As a result, the children have ostracized him. They liked Diego Gutierrez, and they refuse to forgive Matthew for his deceit and method of revenge."

"And you encourage their behavior?" Hayes demanded, outraged.

"Indeed, I do not. But it changes nothing in the way they feel. Children understand justice, and they know that Diego did not receive it."

"You are impertinent!" Hayes said with a whitening around his mouth.

I did not speak for several seconds. "I understand that you did not have all the facts," I said slowly, trying not to further antagonize these two men.

"My son gave me the facts."

"I suggest you speak with him about the incident again," I said and then looked at Olmstead. "You should speak with your son as well, Mr. Olmstead. He witnessed the incident as did Margaret Hudson, Sherman Poole, and Toby Carmichael."

James Olmstead looked uncertain for the first time. Reverend Hayes's expression remained unchanged. I was sure there was more than his son's bloodied nose behind his dislike of Diego Gutierrez.

"Whatever happened that day, that boy doesn't belong in our town's school. He shouldn't be allowed to mix with good children."

"Would you please explain?"

"The boy is Mexican and he is born out of wedlock. He does not belong with decent people."

I was shaking and hoped it did not show. "You deny the boy his rights because of two things over which he has no control?"

"That boy has no rights as I see it, Miss McFarland. And I won't allow him to be reinstated into the school so that he can further blight our good children with the sin of his birth."

I stared, speechless, at Hayes, trembling with anger. "Your Christian understanding shows no bounds, does it?" I managed, but my sarcasm eluded him.

"I'm glad you finally understand our position and agree," he said, obviously satisfied with the conversation's outcome. My mouth dropped open and then clamped shut.

"You completely misunderstand me, Mr. Hayes," I said through my teeth. "I meant that you and Mr. Olmstead here are—"

"I told you once before that Diego was no concern of yours, Miss McFarland," interrupted a harsh and all too familiar voice. I swung around and saw Jordan Bennett. Hayes and Olmstead were staring fixedly at him. I hoped he had heard everything and would now do something about Diego's plight.

Jordan's blue eyes glittered dangerously, and I could feel the anger coiled inside him ready to spring out. But he was not looking at Olmstead or at Hayes. He was looking directly at me. I looked back at him feeling confused and not just a little frightened by the intensity of his gaze. What was he accusing me of now?

"Why don't you carry on with your own business and leave Diego to me?" he said rudely.

I felt myself bristling. "I could do that, Mr. Bennett, if I knew that you planned to do something about this unforgivable situation."

"Who do you think should take responsibility for Diego?" Bennett asked in a quiet, hard voice.

"We all have a responsibility to Diego," I said adamantly and felt the astonished stares of Olmstead and Hayes.

"What are you talking about now, Miss McFarland?" Hayes demanded.

"You deny Diego Gutierrez his rights to an education because of . . . because of personal prejudice. Every other child in this community is at the mercy of your arbitrary decision-making. What you deny Diego today, you could deny tomorrow to Toby Carmichael because he's a waif without parents, or Margaret Hudson because she's so outspoken."

Jordan Bennett's strong fingers closed around my upper arm and he turned me forcibly toward him.

"However important you may think you are, your responsibility concerning the children starts when they walk into your classroom in the morning and ends when they walk out of it at the end of the day," he said in a low, harsh voice. His fingers bit into me when I started to protest. "Now, will you get out and let me handle this . . . especially since you're so damned sure you know what's best for Diego."

"But, I can't go . . ." I stammered, trembling under his vehemence.

"You should have stayed in Boston. Dammit, woman, when are you going to learn to shut up and listen? Now, get out of here. Unless you want to stay and make things worse." He almost flung me toward the aisle leading to the front door. I didn't have the courage to defy him again.

Standing on the wooden sidewalk above the dirt street, I controlled my inclination to burst into tears of anger, frustration, and hurt. Jordan Bennett was at the center of my mangled feelings though I knew the other two men were the ones at whom I should be angry.

It was well into late afternoon, and I knew I should return to my quarters. But I could not face them. I needed to walk, to get away from Sycamore Hill, to get away from the responsibility that lay so heavily on my shoulders.

An afternoon wind whipped my skirts back against my legs and I could feel the chill biting into me. The sycamore grove was up ahead of me and I headed for it as though a haven.

Once there, I sat for a long time beneath the trees, thinking of little but the beautiful land around me. When I finally got up to leave, it was after dark and the stars were out. Below, lights shone in the town's windows.

Never had I felt so lonely.

For just an instant I wanted to cry. How could I be so attracted to a man who did nothing but clash with me? Then I thrust him from my mind.

Walking back by way of the hills along the edge of town. I listened to the night sounds. I wondered if I would hear the ghost tonight and prayed for one uninterrupted eight-hour rest.

When I entered the back door of the school building and walked into my room, I was surprised to see that the

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fire was still going in the stove. With scarcely a look around me, I walked to the door of the schoolroom. It was empty. I felt nothing, and oddly, I was disappointed. Then a faint noise drew my attention. I trembled slightly as I stared into the darkened corners. I saw nothing, but I knew I had heard something. I felt someone watching me.

"Who is there?" I whispered.

A hand touched my shoulder.

Gasping, I swung around so fast I lost my balance and started to topple over backward when strong masculine hands grabbed me.

For an instant, I felt a dizzying blackness closing around me.

"Who were you expecting?" demanded a hard voice.

I opened my eyes and stared up at the intruder.

"Jordan." My voice rasped. The room was too dark to read the expression on his face, but he was standing rigidly in front of me, his hands still biting painfully into my shoulders. "What are you doing here, Mr. Bennett?" I asked with as much composure as I could muster.

He did not answer for a moment. I could feel his eyes boring into me. "Who were you expecting?" he repeated.

"No one."

I could hardly admit to him that I was looking for a ghost and asking it to speak to me. "I was not expecting anyone," I repeated calmly, "and certainly not you creeping around in the dead of night. You have not answered my question, Mr. Bennett."

"I've been waiting for you."

"Here?" I looked around the darkened schoolroom.

"No. In there." He jerked his head, indicating my quarters.

"You've been in my room?" I stammered, the thread of control unraveling. "For how long . . . and how did you get in there?"

"Since early this evening," he said. And you left the door open."

I wondered what was making him so angry. I could feel it crackling in the air.

"It's been a very long day . . . " I said tremulously, "and I'm tired."

"Where have you been, damn you?"

"I walked up to the sycamore grove."

"You've been up on that hill for four hours?" he said, obviously disbelieving. "Who have you been with?"

"I have not been with anyone. And what business is it of yours anyway?"

Some of the tension seemed to drain from him. "It's damn cold in here," he observed in a quieter, more controlled voice. "Let's go back to your room to have our talk."

"I would like to go back to my room. But not with you. And I'm not in the mood to talk with you, either."

He took a couple of steps toward me and grasped my wrist. Pulling me after him he entered my room and shoved the door shut behind us. Releasing me, he leaned back against it, his arms crossed. The candlelight showed the hard, uncompromising set of his face.

"Sit down, Miss McFarland!" he ordered in a cold voice. I sat. A humorless smile tilted his mouth. "Now, was that so damned difficult?"

I was shaking and efforts to stop were to no avail.

"If you're trying to frighten me, you're doing an excellent job," I said.

"Miss McFarland, you don't frighten easily enough. Someone should take you in hand, Abby."

The sky is like a woman's love,
The ocean like a man's:
Oh, neither knows, below, above,
The measure that it spans!

Maurice Thompson
Love's Horizon

I sat in the chair staring at him. My expression seemed to bother him. He frowned and let out his breath.

"Stop looking at me like that! I'm not going to hurt you, for God's sake!"

I swallowed convulsively. *I am not going to cry in front of this man,* I told myself.

"Diego is reinstated. He'll be back in school Monday morning," Jordan said tiredly. He was rubbing the back of his neck as though it ached.

"Oh!" My fingers loosened their death grip on each other. "But how did you ever manage—"

"After you almost made a complete mess of the whole thing?" he finished. "Hayes is at the mercy of pressures himself."

"I just don't understand that man. . . ."

"Obviously not, or you would have handled the situation a damned sight better than you did." The irritation was back in his voice. There was no place for him to sit except on my bed, and he moved away from that restlessly and began to finger my possessions. He touched my brush and comb set lying on top of the old dresser. He picked up a chipped cup and set it back on the shelf.

"How did you get Reverend Hayes to reinstate Diego?" I asked curiously.

"I have my methods of dealing with people like him," Jordan said in a cool voice. He looked at me closely and said, "What are you doing anyway, Abby, teaching in this god forsaken place?"

"I had to find some way to make a living."

"Why didn't you just marry some poor fool? That's what most women do, isn't it?"

"I can't speak for most women, Mr. Bennett, but for myself, I would not marry just to have a roof over my head or food on the table."

"There are men that could supply you with more than just room and board. You could have beautiful clothes, jewelry, whatever you wanted . . . under certain circumstances."

"And for what price?"

"You know very well at what price, Abby. You aren't that naive." His eyes appraised me so intimately that I could scarcely misunderstand his meaning. I was silent and kept my expression blank.

"Well?" he drawled. "What would you say to such a proposal—if any man were tempted to offer you one, that is?"

"A woman who accepted such a proposal would be little more than a prostitute," I answered flatly.

"Harsh judgment for the majority of womankind."

"You're very cynical. Does it have anything to do with your own personal experience?"

"How very incautious you can be," he said in a low voice. "But you are right. My wife was little more than a whore, but what she lacked in genuine emotion she well made up for in skill."

A pain started in the pit of my stomach at the thought of Jordan Bennett with his wife. I kept my face expressionless. He watched me closely, almost as though he was assessing the effect of his words. I stood up.

"You've told me about Diego. Thank you."

He smiled sardonically. "You're welcome."

"It's very late," I said, looking pointedly at the door.

Bennett grinned. "Trying to get rid of me?"

"Quite frankly, yes," I answered bluntly. "Now, please leave. You know the rules."

"The rules be damned. You don't

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care about them and neither do I."

"I do care! I don't want to lose my position here."

"You enjoy being alone so much?" His smile was taunting.

"Have you said all you intended to say, Mr. Bennett?" I fumed. "If you have, please leave my room."

He gave me a disgruntled look. "Believe it or not, I came to thank you for the time you've spent with Diego. If you hadn't stayed out half the night, I wouldn't be here now. I'd be back at the ranch and in bed instead of standing here arguing with you!"

"You could have let the news wait until tomorrow," I snapped back. "You knew that I would be riding out for Diego's regular lessons."

"I thought I'd save you the ride," he said. "I never wanted you on my ranch in the first place, if you'll remember."

A lump of pain caught in my throat and I swallowed hard. "Yes, I remember."

"There are a couple of other things I want to say before I leave." If anything, his voice sounded harder than before. "Can we sit down and talk like civilized people?"

"We can try." I sat down at the table again. He was watching me with an enigmatic expression. Then he glanced around for another chair. Seeing none, he sat on my bed. He leaned forward, clasping his hands between his knees.

"First off, I wanted to tell you to deal very carefully with Hayes. He's an . . . intense person, and not very predictable."

"I could say that about other people in the community," I said. He glanced up and gave me a rueful smile.

"You could fit that description yourself, Miss McFarland."

"I didn't have myself in mind."

"And another thing," he said, looking directly into my eyes with unnerving intensity. "I'm not sure Diego will show up on Monday."

"You plan to keep him home at the ranch?" I said, surprised.

"No, I am not planning to keep him at the ranch."

"Then why?"

"Because he was hurt by all this mess . . . damned hurt. He may not agree to come back to school. I 'd think you would understand why he wouldn't be particularly crazy about the idea of returning for more of the same medicine."

"It won't happen again."

"You don't know that for sure."

"The mess was brought on by adult interference," I told him. "And since you've taken care of that part of it, Diego will only have to contend with the children. One, actually. Matthew Hayes, and believe me, Mr. Bennett, that boy is more than willing to come half way. He's learned his lesson."

Jordan shook his head slightly. "We'll see, won't we?"

"Diego has more courage than you think," I said rather primly.

Jordan smiled. "You think I'm maligning my own son, is that it?"

"No. I think you're being overprotective."

Jordan laughed. "Not too long ago you were saying I did not protect him enough."

"Yes." I nodded, watching the change in his appearance. He was magnetic when he laughed.

"The boy needed time to lick his wounds," Jordan said. "And Matthew Hayes needed time to learn a few things as well. Maybe the two of them can sort things out between them. That would be the ideal solution."

"I agree."

There was a momentary silence before Jordan muttered under his breath. "My God . . ."

"What's the matter?"

"You agreed with me." He grinned.

I smiled, genuinely amused. "A precedent!"

Jordan's grin softened. I wanted to look away from him, afraid he would see more in my eyes than I was willing to have him see. He suddenly seemed too close to me, the room too small and intimate for his dominating presence. His eyes were charting courses over my face, lingering overlong on my mouth. My lips parted slightly as my breath seemed to lodge in my chest, unable to pass the thundering of my heart.

Jordan stood up as though he could not stand to be still any longer. He looked away from me toward the door.

"I'd better be going," he said unnecessarily. It was obvious he wanted to leave and strangely enough, it hurt.

I stood up quickly and said, "I'm glad you came to talk with me."

"I'm not sure I am."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, and I won't detain you any longer. Please tell Diego I will look forward to seeing him on Monday."

Bennett stepped by me and put his hand on the door, but he did not open it. He seemed to be debating with himself. I couldn't stand it.

"So, what are you waiting for?" I demanded, stepping forward, my hands balling into fists. "Why don't you leave?"

He looked down at me and the expression in his eyes drove me further into my anger. I reached out, shoving his hand aside and grasping at the doorknob to pull it open. "Here—let me help you, Mr. Bennett!" I twisted the handle and pulled, but his hand came up to hold the door shut.

"Don't push me too far, Abby."

"Just leave! You were so eager to go a minute ago. Well, go on and leave!"

"Oh, hell!" he muttered fiercely below his breath. Then, his hands descended on my shoulders turning me full against him. I looked up in alarm as he pressed me back against the door, his body following to hold me still as his mouth came down to cover mine. I struggled to be free, but he took advantage of my movements to mold us even closer together. I tried to cry out, but he only used that advantage to deepen his kiss. Suddenly, I did not want to be free.

Sensual madness invaded my mind and body so that I wanted to be closer to his warmth. I wanted to feel the texture of his skin beneath my fingers. I wanted to press myself against the hardening muscles and be encompassed by his strength. I pushed his jacket back to get nearer to him and he impatiently shrugged out of it, letting it slide to the floor. His fingers came up, raking the pins from my hair, heedless of the shambles he was causing and the pain from his haste. Then he was kissing me again, his mouth moving from mine to plunder my ear and then trail down my neck.

When he raised his head, a groan escaped. He started to step back away from me.

"Jordan . . . " I sighed, my hands coming up almost of their own volition to encircle his neck and draw his head down again.

"My God," he rasped, his hands pulling me forward again, my body tight against his. Then he swore beneath his breath. He reached up and grabbed at my wrists.

"Let go, Abby!" he moaned. "For God's sake, let go of me before I finish what we've started."

He dragged my hands free and shoved me back. I stood shaking before him, but the emotion that racked me was not fear. He looked at my face, his own strained and hard, his eyes dilated to blackness.

"I made the mistake of entering your territory," he said with an effort. "I swore to myself I wouldn't, and by God, I won't again."

I stared at him dumbly for a moment before I realized he was totally

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rejecting me. Then the first cold tendrils of understanding crept in to make me feel shamed and dirty. How could I have allowed him to kiss me like that? And worse, why had I responded to the point of entirely losing my self-respect? What did he think of me now? He would think that was the way I responded to all men.

He reached out and tilted my chin up, forcing me to look at him squarely. I felt confused by the emotions that still raged inside me, frightened by his anger and hurt by his indifference.

Oh, dear God in Heaven, what was happening to me? How could I have fallen in love with this man?

"You're ashamed already," he said, half compassionately, half derisively. "Be thankful I didn't take what you offered so magnanimously."

I shut my eyes against the look in his. He released me.

"Stay away from Eden Rock, Miss McFarland. That's my territory. And if you ever come near it, we'll play by my rules then. The consequences—and your sensitive Boston feelings—be damned."

Snatching up his jacket, he walked out the door, slamming it behind him. I stood for a long time staring at nothing and **feeling** utterly miserable and humiliated. I undressed and went to bed.

Once during the night, I awakened. I thought I heard someone moving about in the schoolroom and bumping into a desk, making a scraping sound over the floor. But when I listened intently for more movement, I heard nothing. Exhausted, I fell back to sleep.

In the morning, I found the note scrawled across the blackboard.

Go back to Boston.

The words brought Jordan Bennett into my mind.

Then my eyes caught a movement above my head. I tilted my head back and stared at the noose dangling from one of the roof beams. I parted dry lips to cry out, but no sound escaped.

Report cards were due just before Thanksgiving, and I intended to make a personal visit to each child's family.

The first conferences went exceedingly well. I dreaded the visit to Reverend Hayes and was surprised when he treated me with restraint. I had good reports to make on all the boys, and Matthew's grades had soared since Diego had been reinstated and he and Diego had made their peace. Both Hayes and I were careful not to bring up that issue again, although I knew it would always be between us.

I did not know what to do about my conference with Reva and especially my dreaded meeting with Jordan Bennett about Linda. I remembered only too well how he had told me to stay clear of Eden Rock. Finally, I struck upon a possible solution to my dilemma.

Writing a prim note, I asked Bennett to come to the schoolhouse for our parent-teacher conference. I suggested he bring Reva with him so that I could talk with her about Diego. The following morning, Linda brought a sealed envelope from her father. I tore it open with shaking fingers. His handwriting was a strong, dark scrawl. One word was written in the center of the sheet.

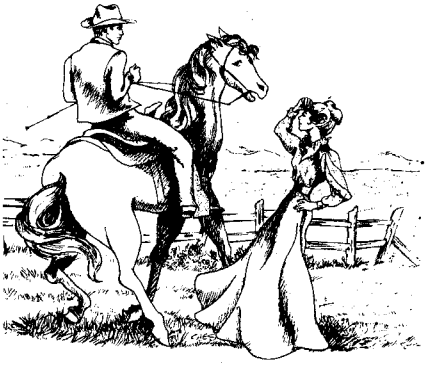
Coward.

"Daddy said that he will be glad to see you at Eden Rock Saturday morning, Miss McFarland," Linda informed me. Then she looked closely at me. "Are you feeling all right, ma'am? Your face is a funny red color."

"I'm fine," I said. "Just fine."

I reached Eden Rock just past nine. Reva told me that Bennett had ridden off early on some ranch business. She expected him back because he had mentioned my visit the previous evening. I fumed silently, sure that he had disappeared deliberately to irritate me and delay my departure.

Reva and I talked over coffee. There was not a great deal to **cover** since I had been tutoring Diego only weeks before and Reva knew his progress. Diego and Linda traipsed into the kitchen near noon. When they said they had not seen Bennett, Reva decided not to hold lunch until his return. She ladled out four bowls of beef and vegetable soup, and cut slices of freshly baked bread. There was churned butter and the special treat of quince jelly. Nothing had tasted so good to me in a long time.



"I'm pleased to see how much you enjoy your food," Reva chuckled.

I flushed slightly and said, "How could I do anything else when you're such a fine cook?"

"What will you do for Thanksgiving?" Reva asked.

"Why don't you come here for Thanksgiving?" Linda asked.

"No, thank you, Linda. That's very nice of you to ask, but I . . . I have other plans," I lied. The thought of spending Thanksgiving at Eden Rock with Bennett was unthinkable. I looked at Reva and, remembering her relationship with him, felt suddenly desolate.

"I think I had better go," I said, standing up. "Thank you very much for the splendid meal, Reva."

"But Jordan will return at any moment," she said in alarm. "You haven't had your conference."

"I'm afraid I can't wait any longer. Perhaps Mr. Bennett could ride into town early next week, and I could talk with him then."

We left it at that and the minute I rode past the front gate of the ranch, I felt relieved.

The less I saw him, the better my peace of mind. I did not need to fuel the fire that burned in my mind and body. I wanted to extinguish it forever, to feel nothing for that man but the same indifference he felt for me. I had reveled in his kiss. He had been the one to stop what he had started. I would not have had the strength of will to do so. I wondered if that was what hurt the most.

It was a magnificent Indian summer day. My afternoon was free; I could ride for as long as I wished.

I turned west and rode along the foothills. I began to feel warm and pushed my bonnet back. The river was nearby, and I turned northeast toward it. The water was shimmering with the sunlight, meandering along below the hills heading north, and I followed it for some time when I saw an idyllic place for a private swim.

Just below me was a stretch of sand and a deep pool beneath an overhang of willow trees. They were almost nude of their leaves, exposing the river cove that would be hidden in the spring. I rode down the incline to the highest tree and tied the horse, then walked the last several yards to the riverbank.

It had been several months since I had had a real bath. I had been using a three-bucket washing method—far from pleasant, but functional. I looked at the pool and thought how wonderful it would be to really submerge my-

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self in fresh, clean water.

Why shouldn't I do something wild just once? Debating with myself, I looked down longingly at that deep pool.

Casting several glances around, I began to hurriedly disrobe. Without further hesitation, I stepped into the chilly water. Initially, I only went into the water up to my thighs, then I submerged my nude body up to my neck. I thought about wetting my hair and wavered. Then with a laugh, I pulled the pins from my bun and let my hair cascade into the water. I leaned back until it was wet, then began a leisurely backstroke around the pool.

My body became used to the cool water. I relaxed and sat back on my heels so that the water near the bank was up to my chin. I had been in the pool almost ten minutes when I heard a horse whinny from somewhere up the hill. A shock of alarm went through me as I jerked around and looked up.

There was nothing up there but my horse, I saw with relief. But what if some passerby saw me in the pool? What would the people in town say if they heard of their schoolmarm bathing naked in the river? I decided that it was time to get out, dress and pin up my hair.

It was almost three by the time I dressed and when I reached the top of the hill, I heard someone cough. I looked around and saw Jordan Bennett leaning against an oak, grinning.

I looked down the hill. From where he stood he had a perfect view of the pool. I looked at him again and began feeling very shaky.

"How long have you been there?" I asked faintly. He pushed away from the tree and walked toward me.

"You have a small birthmark about five inches above your right knee," he said, his eyes laughing wickedly. I felt the blood surge into my face.

Damn him!

"You're even more a rogue than I thought!"

"Is that possible?" He laughed, thoroughly enjoying my discomfort.

"If you had an ounce of decency in you at all, you would have gone away. And what are you doing here anyway? I'm not anywhere near your precious ranch!"

"You are *on* my ranch, Miss McFarland." A certain glint in his eyes brought back all the feelings he had aroused the night in my room.

"I am not." My voice shook.

"You have the typical female sense of direction. You're a full mile inside Eden Rock boundaries."

"Well. I didn't know."

"Too bad. For you, that is." He laughed softly.

"That still doesn't alter things. You should have made yourself known earlier or better still, ridden away!" What was he thinking to have that look in his eyes?

"I don't know a man alive who would ride away from the scene I enjoyed." His eyes moved down, lingering on the rapid rise and fall of my breasts. He smiled.

"Any gentleman would have," I said fiercely. His eyes came back to mine, and he laughed out loud.

"You think so? How very little you know about men, Abby."

"Well, I am not going to stand here arguing with you about it," I said, turning quickly in a flurry to escape, but he moved quickly as well. He swacked my horse hard, sending him cantering off with a start.

"Why did you do that?"I stared at Bennett and then turned to look at my horse. I started after it, but Bennett's arm looped around my waist, lifting me off the ground. His mouth was next to my ear.

"Don't you remember what I told you about coming onto my territory?"

I tried desperately to pry his fingers loose. "Let me go! Mis . . . Mister Bennett!!" I kicked and twisted.

"Not this time!"

My heart thudded. "The message you sent implied safe passage! Now, put me down!"

"Nothing doing!" He laughed."And I did offer you safe passage to the ranchhouse for the purpose of discussing Linda's progress at school, not safe passage to wander around my land and then bathe naked as a jaybird in my river."

"Then put me down and we will talk about Linda," I said in desperation. He set me on my feet, and I hastily rearranged my clothing. My face could not have been redder, nor my heart racing faster.

"Talk away," he said, crossing his arms. And I did. I jabbered on and on about Linda, delighted to change the subject.

"Why don't we sit down? I don't know about you, but I'm getting hot standing out here in the sun," he said, indicating the shade of a huge oak tree. I followed him and sat down slowly, eyeing him warily. He smiled slightly, his eyes mocking.

"Go on."

I did, launching into a suggestion of how Jordan could help Linda overcome her shyness. When I finished, I cast around for something more to say.

"Seems I've misjudged your teaching abilities and dedication," Jordan said, reclining on the grass. "But I still think you're better suited for other things."

"I enjoy teaching very much," I said frankly. He was studying me and I shifted restlessly. "That's all I have to say. Do you have any questions?"

"Plenty," he said.

"What do you want to know?"

"How is it you've never gotten married?"

I started to get up. His hand caught my wrist.

"Well?"

"That's not the kind of question I meant!"

"You didn't qualify what kind." His thumb caressed the inside of my wrist, and I pulled back, disturbed by the intimate touch. He did not release me.

"I never met anyone I wanted to marry," I said quickly.

"But you did have lots of suitors."

"I didn't have any!" I yanked back again, but he retained an even firmer hold. His eyes narrowed.

"You expect me to believe that?"

I tried to tell myself it did not matter what he thought, but it was useless. I sighed.

"It's true. I was hardly in a position to meet any men, and if I had it wouldn't have mattered anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"My guardians, the Haversalls, were not my relations. I was not in their social sphere and did not mingle with their friends. I never had the opportunity to make friends of my own."

"Why not?"

I remembered the way I filled the Haversalls' needs as charwoman, scullery maid, and lady's hand servant, and that they had stolen my large inheritance while making me more and more dependent on them. My throat closed and I averted my face.

"What are you thinking, Abby?"

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter. It was a long time ago and best forgotten."

I was hardly aware that he had moved until I felt his fingers taking the pins from my hair. Before I could protest, he turned my head and put his lips to mine. I pulled back, my heart pounding like a wild thing fighting for freedom. He looked at me with that mocking smile, his eyes very blue. Then he lowered his head again. I set my hands against his chest.

"Don't!"

"We're playing by my rules now.

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Remember?" He changed his course to press his mouth against the curve of my neck. I shuddered ecstatically. My eyes closed and then opened wide again.

I pushed hard, but accomplished nothing. He set his weight against me and I fell backward onto the grass. I twisted and started to kick out, but he put his leg over mine to still my struggles.

He was actually laughing, damn him!

"I'll scream!"

"Go right ahead if it makes you feel better." He nuzzled my neck. His mouth trailed upward. I turned my head away, but he jerked it back, capturing my mouth again. I was breathless when he drew back.

"Admit it, Abby. You want me as much as I want you."

"Let me go!" I squirmed, but he merely used my movement to mold me against him. I could feel the tension in his body, and in his hard muscles. My body responded while my mind fought.

"Kiss me back, damn you," he challenged me. "Say it," he said huskily.

"Jordan . . ." I moaned.

"Say it!"

"I want you . . ."

Suddenly, he drew back. I could not believe it when he sat up. I stared at his back as he stood and moved away. I was in an agony of frustration, and he did not even look at me.

Was this the revenge he had intended? To awaken me, crush my pride, and humiliate me. I wanted to die of shame. What a fool I was!

Shakily I stood up. Tears blinded me as I bolted toward the horse standing about a hundred yards away. Bennett caught me and swung me around to face him.

"I hate you!" I pulled my arm back and struck him across the face. His expression mirrored shock and then a black rage. He slapped me back.

Trembling violently, I put my hand up to my burning cheek. Bennett was staring at me, white-faced. He raked his fingers back through his hair, and I saw that his hand was shaking.

"If you hate me, you've a damned strange way of showing it," he said. "What you hate, my dear Miss McFarland, is yourself. I think you're angry because I didn't take what you offered."

I turned away and ran, unable to bear anymore.

"Abby!"

I kept running. Reaching the horse, I swung myself up, my skirts up about my knees. I did not care; I just wanted to get away.

"Abby!" he shouted again, not moving. "So help me God, if you run from me now, to Hell with you!"

I kicked my heels hard into the horse's side, and unaccustomed to such rude treatment, he lurched forward with a start. Not once did I look back.

"Abby, what's wrong with you today?" Ellen asked. "You haven't been listening to a word I've said for the past half hour. Am I that dull in my dotage?"

"No Ellen. I'm sorry," I apologized quickly. "I've just got a lot on my mind."

"Well, out with it, girl. You look as though you haven't slept a wink in weeks. Now, what's the matter?"

"There isn't anything the matter," I insisted. "It's just . . . just that Christmas is coming up soon, and I'm supposed to have a program for the parents."

"Poppycock! That's not what's eating you, and don't try telling me it is. I've asked you a question and I want an answer."

"Well, you've had the only answer you're going to get!"

Ellen's eyes widened. "My, my, we're touchy today, aren't we? Whatever this 'nothing' is, it's serious." She squinted her pale eyes at me.

"I've had some problems with James Olmstead and Mr. Hayes," I said, hoping she would be satisfied with that.

"That wouldn't surprise me." She chuckled. "I heard about the scene at the general store a while back. I also heard that Jordan arrived at an opportune moment. The report had it that you were about to be hung by your thumbs."

The last person in the world I wanted to think or talk about was Jordan Bennett. I felt as though what had happened between us the week before was written clearly across my forehead.

"Mr. Bennett didn't appreciate my 'interference' as he so kindly called it."

Ellen was watching my face with her usual shrewdness. "Jordan's a sensitive man . . . and don't give me that look of yours, my girl. He is! He's probably still annoyed with you for thinking he fathered Diego."

"I don't imagine it matters what I think about Mr. Bennett," I told her stiffly and stood up. "I really must be going, Ellen. I've got . . . I've got a lot of school things to plan." I was rambling, searching for excuses and knew it. Worse, Ellen knew it. I turned to leave.

"Abby . . ." Ellen called softly, "Abby, my dear, whatever is bothering you . . . if you ever want to talk about it . . . I'm always here. You know that whatever you say to me will be kept in strictest confidence." Her tone was gentle and sympathetic.

"Yes, I know," I nodded, unable to say more. I turned away hoping she had not seen the tears. I shut the door quietly behind me and then leaned back against it. I loved Ellen Greer like a mother. I longed to put my head on her lap and cry out the whole dreadful story. But I was afraid that her affection for me would change to shocked disapproval.

Rubbing the tears away quickly, I told myself I had to get control. I had made a fool of myself. I couldn't alter that fact. It was best not to dwell on what had happened, not to relive the shame and hurt.

Jordan Bennett had said I was no lady, and I had not been. I remembered the way he had looked at me. I should hate him. I should tear him from my mind. Yet I only felt a longing for him that grew worse as the days passed. I couldn't stop thinking about him. He had been right when he said I hated myself, not him. I wondered if other women felt this aching need to be possessed by a man.

Drawing a deep breath, I left the boarding house.

I had no dealings with Jordan Bennett for six weeks. But there would

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be no way to avoid him at the Christmas program this evening. My stomach was knotted into a queasy mass of nerves. I had no worries about the children; they knew their parts well, their costumes were finished and waiting. My fear was of seeing Bennett again and having to speak to him. I had glimpsed him in town once since our river meeting. He had been coming out of Olmstead's store as I rounded McPherson. I had halted, conquering the urge to dart behind a tree and hide. He had mounted his big stallion and started down Main Street. I forced myself to walk on, keeping my head high and face blank of emotion, though every sense I possessed seemed overly aware of him. He rode right by me, casting me one glance that made me remember with renewed and intensified shame every detail of what had taken place between us on that grassy slope.

If such a brief glimpse of him could do that to me, what would happen this evening when I had to face him and talk with him? I prayed and prayed he would not come.

The children were arriving. The Hayes boys came with their father and mother; Reverend Hayes seemed very subdued, but watchful. I suspected he was hoping for some great blunder on my part so that he could dismiss me. Toby Carmichael, Chester and Harold Studebaker and Sherman and Grant Poole arrived next, their parents in tow.

Every time the door opened, my heart lurched. I felt dizzy with tension. Ellen Greer entered, dressed somberly, and next Reva. I tried to still the trembling of my knees, seeing that right behind her was Bennett. I focused my gaze purposely on Diego and Linda. With a few words to me, they went quickly into the backroom to put on their costumes. I forced myself to look up and meet Bennett's blue, enigmatic gaze.

"Good evening." My greeting encompassed both Reva and Bennett. Reva, excited about the evening ahead, chattered gaily. Her son had a major part in this evening's presentation, and she was proud.

Jordan Bennett had not said a word, but he was watching me. I could feel my cheeks fluctuating between warm pink and cold whiteness. Apparently satisfied by what he saw, he turned away and started talking with Emily Olmstead.

I moved about the room, showing people where to sit. My eyes drifted toward him again. He was still talking with Emily, laughing now and then.

It was time to begin. I went into my room where the children were getting dressed.

"Is everyone ready?" I asked. "Matthew, do you have your lines ready?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Everyone in their costumes?"

"Yes ma'am," they all replied in hushed tones, wide-eyed with excitement.

I went out, and stepped onto the low platform. I avoided looking in Bennett's direction, though I was aware his eyes were on me from the moment I came in.

My heart was doing a nervous polka in my chest as I said my first few words of greeting and introduction. Once those were out with a voice that was thankfully unbroken, I felt my control returning. I went on to talk a little more about our play, an adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens.

Matthew was our narrator. He marched forward with great dignity, his nervousness apparent in the slight shaking of the papers in his hand as he began reading in a slow, careful voice. I sat near the door where I could cue the children for their entrances.

Sherman Poole came on first as Scrooge. There was some laughter from the parents as they saw the tall, lanky boy dressed and made up as an old man. Sherman grinned sheepishly and then launched into his theatrical debut with gusto.

The play went very well. Toby Carmichael made a darling Tiny Tim, but it was Grant Poole as Father Christmas who brought down the house with laughter when he tripped over his costume and almost fell flat on his face. The children lined up to make their now confident bows to the audience, then scurried back to change into their costumes for the caroling and nativity scene.

When the carols were over, there were endless rounds of applause. The children scrambled off the platform to greet their parents and find cookies and cake.

Everyone in town had come for the program. Even Sheriff Tom Hallender was there. I noticed that his hair was growing very white at the temples, and he looked tired and drawn.

"You're doing a fine job of teaching, ma'am" he said. "Are you planning to stay on in Sycamore Hill?"

"Yes," I answered, and then added with a smile that I hoped I would be allowed to stay. It was up to the school board whether my contract would be renewed at the end of the year.

"Oh, they'll renew it," he said. "There isn't anyone around these parts who would want to work day and night in this place." I wanted to ask him what he meant when Reverend Hayes approached with his wife on his arm.

"The Christmas program was done fairly well," Hayes said, and I was pleased. It was the first compliment I had ever received from him.

"Thank you very much. I thought Matthew did remarkably well with his narration. He does well in any oral presentation."

"You showed sound judgment selecting him to do it," Hayes agreed proudly. "Your judgment was a little lacking in some others, however." Hallender looked at the minister with obvious interest. Elizabeth Hayes looked up at her husband pleadingly.

"I don't understand," I said.

"You never cease to amaze me, Miss McFarland," he said with a stern shake of his head. "How could you possibly have a Mexican boy play Joseph? It's unthinkable!"

Angry color came into my face. "I'm sorry you feel that way," I said levelly. "The children elected Diego to play Joseph."

"Joseph should have been played by a white child," Hayes said.

I straightened up. I had enough of Jonah Hayes. "I know a little about geography, sir. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, not in London. It's highly unlikely that Christ would have been white . . . or blue-eyed. It's much more reasonable to assume he would have been dark-skinned."

There were curious eyes on us, but I had kept my voice low enough so that others did not hear me. Hayes's mouth was a hard line of anger and indignation. He turned and spoke in a hiss to his pale wife. "Get the boys! We're leaving!" She scurried away to collect her four sons. Hayes did not move and

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I noticed the furious color in his neck.

"June can't come soon enough, Miss McFarland. I suggest you begin looking for other prospects more suited to your temperament."

The color washed out of my cheeks as I watched him walk across the room and leave with his family.

"The life of a public servant is pretty thankless, isn't it?" Tom Hallender said. He smiled sympathetically. "God knows, you have enough work to do without having to take that kind of abuse. Why do you, Miss McFarland? A young woman like you . . . well-bred, pretty. You should be able to find some position in a more exciting place . . . San Francisco, for example. Why go on taking a lot of rough talk from a preacher who thinks you're kin to the devil himself?"

He shook his head, a bitter twist to his mouth. "I've worked for this town for thirty-six years. When I have to retire all I'll get's a gold watch, if I'm lucky. I'm surprised you lasted this long. You must have heard about this place . . ." He glanced around the schoolroom.

"Don't let Tom upset you, Miss McFarland," Elvira Hudson cut in, giving Tom a warning look. She looked at my face. "Are you all right? You look pale."

And no wonder! I had just talked myself right out of my position.

"I just need some air," I replied.

Outside, I let out my breath. I was sick about the scene between myself and Reverend Hayes. I sat down next to the oak behind the schoolhouse. Crossing my arms, I put my head on my knees hoping to still the throbbing in my head.

"You're in a fine state of nerves, aren't you?"

I jerked, and my heart started to pound. Standing up, I faced Jordan Bennett.

"Excuse me. I have to get back," I said, taking a step. He moved in front of me.

"What's your hurry?" He smiled.

How could I still love him so much after what he had done to me? I did not answer. I could not trust my voice.

"You have a headache, don't you?" He gave a low taunting laugh. "I'd chance a bet that it's partly due to your fear of facing me again after what happened between us at the river."

What arrogance! My throat burned as I felt the tears well up.

"What did you expect me to do tonight? Announce everything to everyone?" he asked.

Had his voice gentled or was it only my imagination?

"I suppose I expected just this," I said.

"What?"

"Your further ridicule. You accomplished your goal, Mr. Bennett. Now, I wish you would would just leave me alone."

His mouth tightened. "So you had my intentions all worked out."

"There was no great deduction necessary. It was fairly obvious." How prim I could sound!

"You told me you wanted me." He moved forward again, putting his hands on my shoulders. My muscles stiffened in defense.

"I felt nothing. I said that so you would stop."

He moved closer and my heart raced. His voice dropped and became intimate. "Shall I prove what a little

liar you are? It'd be easy, Abby. Damned easy. I'm not a novice where women are concerned, but you're the most passionate one of my acquaintance. Dare me, Abby— I'd like that."

His head moved down as though he intended to prove his point and his power over me. I began to struggle in earnest then, and the suddenness of my fight earned my momentary freedom. He reached for me and, desperate, I raised my hand. His fingers closed so tightly around my wrist I thought the bones would be crushed.

"You'll come out the loser in any slapping contest you wage against me!" he said. "Don't you remember what happened the last time?"

"Why won't you just leave me alone?"

"I should, by God! I don't know why I bother with you!" He started to say something else when I heard someone calling my name. "We've got to talk, Abby," he said quickly.

"We've nothing more to talk about, Mr. Bennett."

Bennett looked at me angrily, then he let out his breath in exasperation. "Have it your own way!" I watched him walk away and felt bereft. I turned toward my caller.

When I reentered the schoolhouse, Bennett was standing beside Reva, his hand in hers as he whispered something in her ear. My heart plunged into my stomach, but I controlled my expression as Reva, Diego, and Linda crossed the room with Bennett right behind.

"Miss McFarland, we have to go home," Diego said.

"We want to wish you a very merry Christmas, ma'am," Linda added.

"Thank you, and I wish you all the same." I smiled back tremulously. Reva spoke to me for a moment, her friendliness making me feel guilty and ashamed for loving Jordan. Linda hugged me and her father watched. I looked up at him, praying everything I felt was well hidden. His own expression was noncommittal.

"Have a pleasant holiday, Miss McFarland," he said dryly.

"I wish you much happiness with your family, Mr. Bennett," I said primly.

His eyes grew cold.

When they left, I decided I agreed with Reverend Hayes. June could not come soon enough. When it did, I was leaving Sycamore Hill.

The most surprising thing that happened the next week was a visit from Elizabeth Hayes. I had always liked her and wondered how a woman as lovely and gentle as she could stand living with the tyrannical bigot Hayes seemed to be.

Elizabeth told me she "had come to apologize for Jonah." It seemed strange to hear the Reverend Hayes called Jonah and especially with an affectionate inflection. There was a softness in Elizabeth's expression that told me Hayes held no fear for this small woman.

Nonetheless, though I didn't say so, I felt Hayes should have apologized in person. Elizabeth smiled at me appealingly. "He is not a bad man," she said. Next, she startled me by telling me that her husband admired me and, while he didn't always agree with me, he respected my spirit. She said sadly that Jonah had not always been so uncompromising. They had lost a littel girl when the child was four, and the loss had made Jonah lose a basic faith in God.

"Jonah's father was a preacher," Elizabeth said. "A truly dreadful man—fierce, unforgiving . . . the fire-and-brimstone kind of minister. Jonah

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didn't want to be like him. But he's becoming that way and doesn't realize it."

"Have you tried talking with him about it?"

"I don't know that it would do any good. If I were to say anything to him, he would look on it as betrayal of our love. It would hurt him too deeply."

"Would he listen to anyone else?"

"The only person that he truly respects here in Sycamore Hill isn't even a church member any longer, Jordan Bennett."

"It . . . it surprises me that the Reverend would think so much of him ."

"You mean because of all the gossip?"

I turned away, pouring tea.

"I don't believe the stories," Elizabeth said. "People disliked Gwendolyn Bennett very much. She hated living in California and never tried to make friends with anyone. Everyone knew that the marriage was unhappy. She died of a broken neck. Unfortunately, many people chose to believe that Mr. Bennett killed her. I don't believe he would hurt anyone."

"I've heard he has a violent temper."

"I've never seen him angry. And he's a loving father."

"Mr. Hayes believes Mr. Bennett is Diego Gutierrez's father. That was part of his decision to expel the boy."

Elizabeth sighed. "I know. But it doesn't affect his respect for Mr. Bennett. Usually the blame for such unfortunate situations is put on the woman involved."

"Then you believe it's true?"

"I really don't know. It's possible, I suppose. They have lived together for years. And neither one of them has ever denied the story, though I shouldn't think they owed anyone any explanations."

"I don't believe it," I said quietly.

Elizabeth Hayes finished her tea and stood up, pulling her shawl up around her shoulders again. "I've kept you much too long, and you're so kind. I'm very grateful for what you've done for our boys."

I thanked her for coming. The new insight into Jonah Hayes would help me greatly.

When I again went to see Ellen, we discussed the argument I had had with the Reverend.

"You were tactless to say the least," Ellen said bluntly. "When are you going to learn to avoid that man and keep your big mouth shut? You have Diego reinstated, and Matthew Hayes has learned his lesson. Don't expect to work miracles by rearranging Reverend Hayes's head."

I laughed, for a while forgetting my depression over Jordan Bennett. "How did you manage to be tactful all those years, Ellen?"

She sniffed. "Most of the people in this town were in my schoolroom at one time or another. I think most of them are still a little in awe of me."

"You have been around long enough," I teased.

"Don't be impertinent!" she said and waggled a gnarled finger. "But don't think you've sidetracked me either. I want to know what's going on between you and Jordan Bennett."

My cheeks crimsoned. "Whatever are you talking about?"

"You look guilty as sin, my dear. Now out with it!"

"Ellen. . ."

"You left the schoolroom after that scene with Hayes. A few minutes later, Jordan disappears. Did he talk with you?"

"Yes, for a few minutes," I said wearily.

"Tell me what happened."

"Nothing!"

"Hogwash!" She was not to be put off. "You left the schoolroom. Jordan followed. He came back in looking like thunder itself. You return looking little better than death warmed over Such drama! Now out with it!"

"I had a headache after my argument with the Reverend. I went outside for some fresh air. Mr. Bennett wanted to speak with me about . . . some school business."

"What school business?"

"You're impossible, Ellen!"

She grinned, her face crinkling. "Absolutely," she said unfazed. "You know, my dear, I love you like my own daughter. I would hate to see you make some dreadful mistake."

I had already made a huge one, I thought, remembering vividly what had happened by the river. I would never forget it. And I doubted if he would let me.

"Are you in love with Jordan Bennett?"

All the humiliation I had suffered at his hands swelled up inside me. Love him? After what he had done to me? The answer came easily. Yes, in spite of everything. Fool that I was, I did love Jordan Bennett.

"Abby . . ." Ellen said gently, and I suddenly realized that I was crying, tears streaming down my cheeks. I brushed them away hurriedly and rose.

"Abby, my dear . . ."

All I wanted to do was be by myself for a while. I needed to get control again. I walked in the hills for a long time. Bennett's face in my mind's eye kept taunting me. Nothing resolved, I turned back as the sun was going down.

It was very late when I reached the schoolhouse. As soon as I walked in I knew someone was there. The tea kettle was on and was steaming madly. Checking I found it almost empty. The door to the schoolroom was ajar and I went in. For a moment, I didn't see anything. Everything seemed to be in its place.

Then I saw someone sitting in the chair at my desk. My heart stopped and then started again in a rapid drumbeat. I moved forward slowly, straining my eyes in the dim light.

Then I recognized her. Her pale blue eyes were open and her mouth sagged open in a soundless cry. The fingers of her right hand clutched at the front of her dress.

"Ellen!" I rushed forward. She was freezing cold. She slid sideways into my arms. "Ellen! Ellen!" I screamed over and over, unable to stop myself.

Clouds darkened overhead as the wind whipped wildly through the sycamore trees. A crowd followed six men bearing a small pine box on their shoulders. They moved slowly through the gate of the cemetery. Here and there people sobbed or spoke in low voices. Reverend Hayes moved forward, flanked by Jesuit Father Anthony from Sycamore Hill's only other church, St. Joseph's. Ellen Greer had been a shared servant of the town and her funeral was a joint concern. Their eulogy became a drone of sound against the wind.

Bennet, one of the pallbearers, stood at the front. His face was pale and controlled.

I watched as the pallbearers lifted the casket. Closing my eyes, I wanted to blot out the picture of Ellen being set into that cold, dark grave at the top of the hill. "I love you like my own daughter . . ." I remembered. Tears burned and then coursed down my cheeks, no longer controlled by my will.

If only I had been there, perhaps I could have helped her. But Dr. Kirk said she had died almost instantly from a heart seizure. He said she had been ill for a number of years. He also told me what I already knew; Ellen was ready for death, and there was comfort in the fact that she died in the schoolhouse where she had spent fifty

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years of her life. But if I had been there when she died I could have comforted her. More important, I could have told her how much I loved her. I had never told her, and that was what I regretted the most.

People moved past me down the hill. I looked at the faces that passed me without really seeing them. Jordan was approaching, his eyes seeking mine with some message I was then incapable of comprehending. I turned away quickly and walked on down the hill. I had stopped by a lonely grave outside the cemetery when Tom Hallender caught up with me.

"Miss McFarland, could I have a minute of your time, please?"

When I did not answer, he moved closer. "I know you cared for Miss Greer. You were good friends with the old lady. I don't think she would have wanted the same kind of life for you." His comment about Ellen being an old lady irritated me. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I mean working for fifty years and then getting nothing for it."

"You shouldn't be so concerned, Mr. Hallender. Why are you . . ."

"Because I'm in the same position Miss Greer was, only I haven't got a niece with a boarding house," he interrupted bitterly. "I wouldn't want to see the same thing happening to you. Someone's got to get you out."

"I don't understand."

"It's so simple. I've got a little money saved. I'll loan it to you so you can go someplace else and start anew."

My eyes opened wide. "Why should you want to do that for me?" I hardly knew this man and yet he was offering me his savings. Why?

"So you don't end up like Miss Greer . . . wasting your life."

"I don't see teaching as a waste of my life, Mr. Hallender."

Hallender looked down at the grave by which I was standing. "Beats me why you would even want to go back to that place with everything that's happened there. Miss Greer wasn't the only one who died there," he said calmly. I did not say anything for a long moment, but my heart was thudding with alarm. He looked down at the grave again.

"Please explain," I managed finally.

"There was a teacher just before you . . ."

"Prudence Townsend . . . yes, I know."

"You're standing by her grave."

"How did she die? And why is she buried here outside the cemetery?" I whispered.

"She was buried here because the priest said she couldn't be buried in consecrated soil. Prudence Townsend hanged herself, Miss McFarland," he said quietly, a cold expression on his face.

"Dear God," I gasped. "But why?"

"Who knows? Probably couldn't stand the loneliness. But that's why they had trouble finding another schoolmistress. Word got around these parts about what happened. No one wanted to live in that place."

I could feel my face turn white.

"So Hayes said he'd write East to one of the schools." And the head of the school had by chance been a friend of Bradford Dobson. "They all decided among themselves to keep the story about Miss Townsend a secret. They let the place go until you came." He gave a harsh, mocking laugh. "They were all half expecting you to come running out of there the first night. She hanged herself from the front beam. The one nearest the desk."

I pressed my hands over my ears. "Don't . . ."

"I'm sorry," he said. "My offer still goes. Why don't you think about it?" He walked off leaving me standing beside Prudence Townsend's grave.

Heedless of the darkening sky, I wandered in the hills behind town, finding the solitude my grief craved. I cried for Ellen whom I had loved; then I sank into a tortured despair over my love for Jordan Bennett. I thought about Prudence Townsend. She had hanged herself because she could no longer bear the loneliness. I was sure it was Prudence that haunted the schoolhouse, but now the supernatural was less frightening to me than my own dismal future.

But I had to go back to the only home I had. Grief and nerves had taken their toll, I realized, when I got back to the schoolhouse. It took forever to take a spongebath, bank the fire and go to bed.

Once there I must have dozed off immediately.

The mind has a thousand eyes,
And the day but one:
Yet the light of the bright world dies
With the dying sun.
The mind has a thousand eyes,
And the heart but one:
Yet the light of a whole life dies,
When love is done.

Francis William Bourdillon
Light

When I awakened later, rain was pounding on the roof. My eyes closed slowly, lulled by its rhythmic beating. Then I heard the crying.

Every few minutes it would start, softly and plaintively. It had happened so many times before it had ceased to alarm me. But now there was added meaning to it. I remained still on my narrow, lumpy cot, but gradually I began to feel restless with the continued desolate moaning coming from the other room. Wrapping my blanket around me, I got up, the floor icy beneath my bare feet. Almost unaware of what I was doing, I entered the schoolroom. I looked about the room. A rope, with a noose at its end, hung from the beam closest to the desk. Once before it had been there, and I had pulled it down in a moment of blind panic. It seemed even more frightening now.

The lady of the schoolroom began to cry again. It seemed to come from nowhere and yet everywhere, surrounding me like a shroud. I turned slowly, expecting to see some physical evidence of her presence. There was nothing and soon the crying stopped.

"Prudence?" I whispered softly into the darkness. "Prudence . . ." My eyes drifted to the rope suspended from the beam. I reached out and fingered it. The crying began again, low and plaintive in the darkened room.

"Prudence . . ." I whispered shakily. The crying stopped.

Then I saw something across the room moving slowly toward me. Frantic to escape, I dashed to the front of the schoolroom. I reached the door and twisted at the knob.

I had almost succeeded when something hit me from behind. I cried out in pain. Then blackness engulfed me.

"Abby! Abby!"

The familiar voice roused me. My eyelids flickered and then opened. I stared up into Jordan Bennett's taut face.

"What in blazes happened to you? I found you at the bottom of the steps."

I still could not believe he was here. I was dreaming. The stove came into view, and the cabinet. Orphan was meowing at the back door, demanding her morning bowl of warm milk. Pushing myself up on my cot, I winced.

"Ohhh, my head." I reached up to press fingers against the throbbing spot. Bennett roughly pushed my hand away and drew me forward. My hands instinctively pressed defensively against his chest in an effort to hold him away.

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"I know you can't stand having me touch you," he said harshly, "but suffer it for a minute, will you? I promise I won't take it as encouragement." I closed my eyes wishing my heart would stop its frantic beating.

"You've got yourself quite a goose egg," he said. "What did you do to yourself, for God's sake?" Bristling at his tone, I pushed back and then wished I hadn't. My head spun sickeningly.

"Just take it easy for a minute. I've got to clear the blood away," he said in a surprisingly gentle voice. With a damp cloth, he swabbed the spot. I sensed the exact moment when his mood changed. His hand moved from the nape of my neck to my shoulder. His touch was subtly gentler, his breath warm against my hair.

"Abby . . ."

I had to say or do something before he knew the power he had over me. "I . . . I don't feel well."

"I believe it." His hands moved in a lingering caress down my back. I took my hands from his chest and hugged myself tightly.

"Please let go of me."

His hands dropped away, but I could feel his eyes boring into me. Then he got up from the cot and turned away.

"How did it happen?"

"What?"

"The bump on your head, what else?"

"I'm not sure," I said, swinging my feet from the cot.

"You'd better not stand up just yet," he said. My head was swimming again and I gave a faint laugh.

"Don't worry. I won't."

"Did you fall down the steps?"

"No. Something hit me last night."

"Last night? You've been out there since last night?" he demanded.

"No. In the schoolroom."

"Then what were you doing on the back steps?"

"I woke up in the schoolroom, and I was freezing. The fire was out and there wasn't any wood in the box, so I went out to get some. I guess I fainted."

I pressed my fingers against my temple. I heard Bennett move and looked up as he stalked out the back door, slamming it behind him. I stared in confusion, thinking he had gone away. What had I expected? For him to care?

A moment later, the door opened again and I looked up tearfully. He scowled at me. "Is your head hurting you again?"

"N-no." I brushed away the tears, averting my eyes.

He dumped a load of wood in the bin and set to work on the stove.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"You don't have to do that, I can—"

His look silenced me. "No, I don't, do I. I wonder why I'm bothering."

"Why are you then?" I asked, stung.

He exhaled sharply, but ignored my question.

When the fire was restarted, he stood up and turned around. I had been watching him, remembering what it had been like being touched by him. When he looked at me, I looked away.

"Do you want to sit by the fire? You'll get warm faster than sitting at the other end of the room," he said. I did not answer. Nor did I move. "I'll stand by the door if it makes you feel any safer."

The bitterness of his tone made me flinch, but I stood up and moved slowly across the room. The dizziness had lessened and so had the throbbing. I sat down at the table, remembering the last time he had been here. My face felt warm and I kept looking at my hands. Bennett stood by the door, his arms crossed over his chest. I could feel him watching me.

"You said you were hit from behind," he prompted, and I looked up. I thought I saw real concern for me written on his face, but his expression was quickly shuttered.

"I guess that's what happened. I'm not sure. I don't know."

"When did all this happen?"

"I don't know. About one or two in the morning, I suppose."

"What were you doing in the schoolroom at one or two in the morning?"

"I don't want to talk about it with you," I said hoarsely. "You'd never believe me anyway."

"Why don't you try me?"

"Just go away! You'd never believe me!"

"Abby . . . give me a chance." He moved away from the door to stand in front of the table. His closeness did awesome things to me. I had to say something, so I blurted everything out at once in a tense question.

"Would you believe me if I told you that Prudence Townsend was in the schoolroom last night?" He looked at me and his mouth tilted up gently at one side.

"Before or after you hit your head?"

Tears burned as I glared up at him. "I knew you wouldn't believe me! I should have learned a long time ago how much you enjoy laughing at me. Why don't you just go away and leave me alone?"

"Abby . . ."

A sob escaped and I clamped my jaws shut, speaking through my teeth. "Go away!"

"You can't seriously believe there's a ghost here, can you?"

I started to laugh, a high-pitched sound that stopped as an agonizing pain shot through my head.

"We'd better get you to Doc Kirk," he said, putting a hand beneath my elbow.

"No!" I jerked my arm away.

"Don't be a fool! You've probably got a concussion. It's nothing to fool around with."

"I'm all right. It's just a little bump on the head!"

I put my head in my hands. "Just go away, Jordan. Just, please, go away and leave me alone."

There was silence for a moment, and then his fingers pressed comfortingly on my shoulder before dropping away. He came back around in front of me.

"You were saying about Prudence Townsend," he prompted again. I shook my head slowly. "Tell me, Abby. I'm not going to laugh at you."

"Not out loud maybe."

"Abby . . ."

I looked up at him. "She tried to kill me!" He did not say anything and I searched his face. "I saw her, Jordan."

He straightened. "Then we'll go from there." He gave me a slow smile. "Would you mind terribly if I sat down?"

I sighed. "There's a chair just inside the schoolroom door."

When he was seated, I felt frozen with tension. I was afraid to look at him again, certain he would see how I felt about him.

"Start at the beginning."

"I . . . I heard her crying again."

"Again?"

I glanced up and then away again. "I've heard her crying since the first. Ellen said it was just night sounds . . . animals, boards creaking, that sort of thing. But it wasn't. It was Prudence Townsend's ghost."

"How long have you known about Miss Townsend—about her death?"

"I didn't know until yesterday . . . after Ellen's funeral." I stopped, refusing to allow myself to think of Ellen now. I would only cry again and make a further fool of myself in front of Bennett. I swallowed hard again before continuing.

"I've walked by that pathetic little

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grave outside the cemetery many times before. I was always curious about it, but never asked anyone. Sheriff Hallender stopped to talk to me, and he told me about her . . . and what she did to herself." I shuddered at the memory of that conversation.

Bennett was watching me intently. "What does she have to do with the bump on your head?"

I blinked, then focused on him.

"She . . . she was crying again last night and I went into the schoolroom. She . . . she appeared and came at me. I ran. I could feel her right behind me and ran toward the front door. Something hit me on the back of the head. The next thing I remember, it was morning and I was lying in the middle of the schoolroom." Jordan Bennett frowned.

"You think I'm just another lonely schoolmarm letting her imagination carry her away."

"Are you?"

"She exists, I tell you. Prudence Townsend is in that schoolroom. I've overheard people talking about it, though I didn't understand what they were talking about until Tom Hallender told me about her death. There are others in this town who believe Prudence Townsend is haunting this place. They just decided not to share the information with me when I came."

"Understandable," he muttered.

"Very!" I agreed. "Though it wouldn't have mattered much."

"What do you mean?"

"I had a total of two dollars in my bag. Where would I have gone?" I spread my hands. "But she didn't threaten me then. It was just the crying at night and knowing she was here."

"You're sure someone isn't just playing an elaborate joke on you?"

"A rather macabre joke, wouldn't you say? And it's been going on for four months."

"Maybe someone wants you out of the schoolhouse."

I looked at him. "There are at least three people who have voiced that wish. Mr. Olmstead and the Reverend Hayes are two."

"And the third?"

"You."

Bennett's eyes darkened. "You know just how to irritate the hell out of me, don't you?" He paused. "What else can you tell me?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"Is there any physical evidence of what happened?"

I thought hard for a moment. "There have been notes scrawled on the blackboard. And twice there's been a rope over the front beam."

"A rope? I'd like to have a look at it."

"It's gone. It was there last night. It wasn't there this morning."

"Are you sure it was there in the first place?" he asked.

"Yes!" I shouted.

"All right! Don't get overwrought!" he said. "What sort of notes? Anything unusual about the writing?"

"Printing. Not neat."

Bennett stood up and paced restlessly about the room. I watched him, unable to look away. Would I ever be able to forget this man? I remembered the first time I had seen him on the road. I had responded to him even then.

"What's the matter?"

I blinked and looked away, realizing that he had stopped and had been looking at me. "Nothing."

"It didn't look like nothing. What is it?"

"Nothing!"

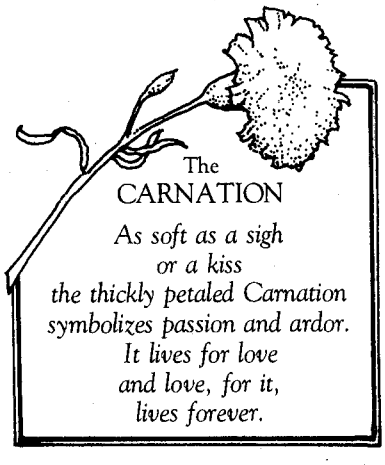
Bennett gave me a withering look. "If I thought beating you would do any good, I'd do it!" He moved toward the door and I stared at him, bewildered. I had caught a glimpse of something in his expression that made me feel close to tears. For a fleeting moment I began to wonder if I had misjudged his feelings toward me.

"Jordan?"

He looked back at me, his face as stern as ever. "Did you have something else you wanted to tell me?"

"No, I guess not. I think I've told you quite enough as it is," I said tiredly.

"I think something very strange is going on around here. Someone wants to scare you out of here," he went on. "But I doubt if it's a ghost. There's a more rational explanation than that one."



"What do you think I should do?" I said shakily. I wanted him to make the decision for me. His mouth tightened again.

"Since you won't take my advice and see Doc Kirk, I think you should lie down and rest," he said curtly. That had not been what I meant and he knew it. Unable to bear his indifference, I looked away. He yanked open the door and left.

It was only after he had gone that I wondered why he had come to the schoolhouse in the first place.

After fixing myself a light breakfast of warm toast and tea, I did as Jordan suggested and lay down on my cot to rest. Surprisingly, I slept for hours and awakened feeling somewhat refreshed. The dizziness was gone, though I still had a headache and the lump on the back of my head was still tender to the touch.

Around four, I ate a small can of stew for dinner and then took a bath. By the time I finished it was after six and dark. The sky had been overcast that afternoon, and I wondered if there would be another storm tonight. I put pans in the schoolroom to catch the water from the leaks and went to bed.

A loud crash and muffled oath awakened me.

I felt dazed with sleep for a moment and then heard another crash. Someone was in the schoolroom. I remembered what Jordan had said that afternoon about someone wanting to scare me into leaving and felt a sudden surge of anger. Was this all a hoax designed to terrify me? I shoved back the covers and tiptoed across to the lantern near the door. Hurriedly, I struck a match and set it to the wick. Then I opened the door, intending to confront the mischiefmaker and demand an explanation.

The front door of the school house was ajar. I hooked the lantern on the bar just inside my door and walked into the classroom looking around. A pan was upside down and moved from where I had set it earlier. A puddle of water was splashed on the floor beside it.

"You!" I breathed.

"I saw the light in your room. What's going on?" Jordan Bennett asked.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"I came to see your ghost, what else?" he answered mockingly. He looked away and noticed the pan. "Did the cat kick over the pan? Or did Prudence Townsend?" I didn't like his tone. "Someone did," I said, looking

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straight at him.

"Not me! And not a ghost. But someone very human."

"What's the difference," I said wearily, too tired to care if he believed me or not. He was looking at me and the lantern light from behind me cast enough illumination for me to see the tautness of his expression. I was unaware that the light behind me clearly silhouetted my body.

"Abby . . ."

My heart thudded wildly at his tone. He came slowly toward me, stopping just in front of me. For a long moment, he did not move. Then his hands came up to my shoulders, caressing and gentle. I tilted my chin up as his mouth descended, touching mine in a soft kiss. I knew I should draw away, but I didn't want to. He lifted his head and looked down into my face. He drew me against him and kissed me again. His kiss went on, one lingering caress leading to another. Knowing that my effect on him was as fast and profound as his on me was intoxicating. The blood sang in my ears, and my heart drummed in a frantic race with his.

He moved restlessly, pushing back far enough so that I saw his eyes were dilated and bright. His hand shook as he raised it to my face. Then he kissed me again.

"You know I want you, Abby. Let me make love to you," he said against my mouth.

Want . . . not love, my mind cried painfully.

He sensed my withdrawal. His embrace tightened. "Abby . . ." My own need for him almost threatened to overcome me. I struggled slightly in his arms, afraid I would forget everything but this moment and my intense desire. He kissed me again and I pulled my mouth away, knowing I had to say something, anything, to stop myself from going further.

"I haven't forgotten your obligations to Reva even if you have," I said, grasping at the first thing that came into my head. It was enough. Bennett's caress stopped abruptly. He did not move and his stillness was worse than anything else I had ever experienced. Irrationally, I wanted to reach up and kiss him, tell him I did not mean a word of it.

His fingers bit into my shoulders as he shoved me away. His eyes were still dark and bright but with another emotion equally as primitive as passion.

"That was beautifully effective." His look was full of hostility. "So you still persist in believing Diego is my son." When I did not answer, he went on. "I'd be proud to have a son like him. But no, damn you! He is not my son! I've never been with Reva . . . not in that way. I grew up with her—she's like a sister." His fingers reached out, tilting my face up with a jerk. "Or do you think me capable of that sin as well?" He released me and stepped away as though afraid of what he might do if he remained too close to me.

"There was a time when you wanted me to believe it was true that you were Diego's father," I said.

He looked at me with contempt. "You believed exactly what you wanted. You heard just what you wanted. I thought if you had time to think things through, you'd have sense enough not to believe the gossip. Until now, I've never explained myself to anyone. I didn't think it'd even be necessary with you. But you're no better than anyone else. In fact, you're worse! You're the lowest kind of hypocrite there is. Have you ever analyzed your actions, Miss Abigail McFarland? You turn up your Boston nose over what you imagine goes on with Reva and me while I could have done anything I wanted had I chosen to in the field above Altadena Creek. You made it more than clear how much you wanted me on that occasion." I recoiled from him as though he had struck me.

"Get out!" I said chokingly. "I don't ever want to see you again."

"Only too happy to oblige." His own face was deathly pale. "But one other thing before I go. Just for the record, mind you. I did not murder my wife. She was drunk when she fell down the stairs and broke her neck. I was working five miles from the ranchhouse at the time. When you invite the ladies in for tea, shovel that into their cups along with the sugar!"

Jordan turned and strode out. A moment later, I heard his horse galloping away into the night. Sinking down,

I shut my eyes, too desolate even for tears anymore.

"Well, well, well," came a satisfied voice from the doorway to my room. I looked up and stared in frightened surprise at the man standing there.

"I couldn't have planned things better myself." The man heaved something. A length of rope snaked across the floor to my feet. I stared at it in horror, seeing the noose at the end. Then I looked up again.

Tom Hallender unholstered his gun and aimed it at me.

"Pick up the rope, Miss McFarland," Hallender instructed me coldly. I did not move, unable to tear my eyes from the black barrel of his forty-five. His hand was steady, and he moved his thumb slowly to cock the hammer. It made a deadly click, sending a shock of terror through me.

"I said . . . pick up the rope," he ordered in a low voice.

I bent forward at the waist, feeling blindly for the rope at my feet. "What are you going to do?"

"It's not what I plan to do. It's what you're going to do to yourself," he told me, his eyes dropping to the rope in my hand. I blinked, confused. Then my heart stopped.

"I don't understand," I murmured, terrified that I did.

"You're intelligent. It's all very simple. You're going to hang yourself just like Prudence Townsend did."

I watched as he moved slowly into the room. He put his lantern on the desk and leaned back. The barrel of the gun never wavered from my head, but he carefully returned the hammer and I breathed again. "I'll give you a little assistance, of course."

"Why would I want to do such a thing?" I asked.

"Loneliness," he shrugged indifferently. "Tonight is Christmas Eve."

Hallender's eyes never once left mine. "It's your own fault it's come to this," he said accusingly. "You should have taken the notes I left more seriously. But you didn't.I thought the noises and crying would do the trick . . . but you weren't buying that either. So I pulled the nail from the front railing, hoping you would break your leg or neck reaching for that stray cat I set on the sill. But hell, no!" he snarled. "You didn't hurt a hair on your damn head. Then I tried offering you a loan yesterday," Hallender continued. "After Miss Greer's funeral, you looked like you were ready to get away from Sycamore Hill. But you turned me down. That left me with no choice. I

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had to kill you. I thought I had last night, but it seems you have a very hard head, Miss McFarland."

"*You* hit me?"

He made an affirmative movement of his head.

"And you're the one that has been making all the crying noises and eerie sounds?"

"None other."

"But I don't understand why you're doing all this? What have I ever done to make you want to do these things . . . or to kill me?"

"I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to kill you. But I have to. Like I said. It would never have come to hanging you if you'd taken my earlier warnings seriously. Now, I've got no choice but to kill you." He sounded defensive. "It won't be slow like it was for her," he said kindly.

I felt an hysterical impulse to laugh. Clearly the man was insane. Hallender straightened away from the desk, impatient to get on with it. "Bring the rope over here."

I couldn't have moved even if I had wanted to.

"Come on. You're not making this any easier for me."

"Why should I?"

"Stalling isn't going to do you any good."

"You should at least tell me why you're doing this!" I cried, desperate for time.

"Money," he retorted simply.

"Money? But how are you going to get money for murdering me?"

"The money is stashed here."

"I don't know anything about any money," I said blankly.

"Well, since you're going to die for it, I might as well tell you about it." He settled back against the desk again. I felt a moment's reprieve.

"Three men robbed the bank a year ago. They got off with one hundred and fifty thousand dollars," he explained. "Now do you get it?"

I stared at him, remembering the stories I had heard about the robbery.

"You mean you organized the robbery?"

"I had nothing to do with the robbery," he said, evidently irritated by my stupidity. "I'm Sheriff, remember? It was my job to go after those thieves and get the money back and bring them in. Well, I caught up with them. They backtracked on me and tried to set up an ambush. But it backfired. I got them instead. One at a time, Indian style. But I risked my neck doing it." Comprehension sank in. "You mean you murdered those men and kept the money from the robbery."

Hallender's mouth tightened, and the knuckles of his gunhand stood out white. "I told you I risked my life for that money. It's mine by rights. The town owes me something for thirty-six years and a bum leg."

"That . . . that may be true, Mr. Hallender. But one hundred and fifty thousand dollars?"

"How much is a man's life worth? I've been lamed once for this town. I got a couple of pats on the back for that. If I'd been killed they would have given me a pine box. I'm taking that money!"

"But why didn't you just take the money then and keep going? Why did you come back here?"

"If I'd done that, I'd never have had any peace. My face would have been plastered all over the state. I'd have had someone on my trail for the rest of my life. No, thank you. Better this way . . . hiding the money and waiting until I could retire. That way it'd just be another robbery where the thieves got away with it. In time, I could go someplace far away and enjoy my good fortune."

"Why don't you just take the money now and go?"

"I wouldn't be out of here five minutes and you'd be setting the town on me."

"But you could have come in here any time I was out . . . or at night when you were pretending to be Prudence, and moved the money somewhere else. Why didn't you do that? Why do you have to kill me?"

"You think I just stuck it in a desk or something?" he laughed. "All that money? Ten big bags of it, Miss McFarland! No, ma'am." He laughed then as though greatly amused.

"Where is it?" I asked.

He laughed again, slapping his leg in obvious enjoyment. "You've been sleeping on it for months."

"What?" I breathed. "My cot?"

"It was the most obvious place I could think of . . . but which others would discard for the same reason. It's sewn right into your mattress." He moved toward me.

"People won't believe I killed myself," I said quietly.

"You think not? There are plenty of reasons I can think of why people will

"Like what?" I was stalling for time.

for time.

"I overheard a damned good one just before I came in. Bennett! You're in love with him! Couldn't be more perfect if I had planned it myself."

"Nobody will believe it. Everyone has seen the antagonism between Mr. Bennett and me," I said.

Hallender grinned mockingly. "But he was your lover, wasn't he?"

"No, he was not," I said. "People won't believe it."

"Bennett was right when he said people believe gossip," Hallender said, shrugging. "Everyone believes he killed his wife. He didn't, of course."

"How do you know?"

"Being Sheriff. Witnesses at the ranch told me his high-and-mighty bitch of a wife was a lush. And I smelled the brandy on her myself when Bennett brought her body in that day." He paused, shifting the gun slightly. "An accident. But people prefer to believe the worst."

Ellen's words exactly.

I had been no better than anyone else. I was in love with Jordan Bennett, and yet I had always had some faint doubt. No wonder he hated me so much. I closed my eyes, remembering his face as I had last seen him. What would he think when they found my body? Would he blame himself, thinking what he said had pushed me too far?

I didn't want that. He had had enough grief in his life.

"But all that has nothing to do with me," I said.

"No? A lot of scandal surrounds Bennett. You've heard it. It would just take a small hint to add your suicide to his other list of sins. Pretty, young schoolteacher falls for rich rancher, he scorns her, and she kills herself."

Hallender was right. People would believe it.

"Pick up the rope." Hallender jerked the gun. My hands were perspiring. "Pick it up," he repeated.

I made my decision. If I was going to die, it wasn't going to be by hanging. I let the rope fall from my fingers. He cocked the hammer again and I waited silently.

"Pick it up, damn you!"

I shook my head, unable to speak.

"You think I won't shoot you, is that it?" he snarled. Something in his eyes told me he was uncertain. And I knew why. If he shot me, he would arouse the town.

"If you shoot me, everyone will know it was murder," I said shakily.

"I could shoot you point-blank in the head . . . it'd still look like suicide," he said chillingly. He put the barrel of the gun almost against my temple.

"Where would I get a gun, Mr. Hallender? I couldn't afford to buy one and if I could, it would have been purchased from Olmstead. He would

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know I had no gun." I thought of Jordan and realized with sudden clarity that he had been watching the schoolhouse, protecting me. And I had pushed him away.

"Pick up the rope," he said harshly, now impatient. I could see that the hand holding the gun was not quite steady. An unknown resolve possessed me then. Hallender had spoken the truth. He did not want to kill me, and I was not going to let him.

"Who will find my body, Mr. Hallender?" I asked.

He frowned. "I don't know and I don't much care."

"But you're a decent man, I think. Suppose a child came in here and saw your handiwork?"

"I could always come back tomorrow." The other possibility obviously disturbed him.

"On what excuse? You're not a parent. I've done nothing to warrant a visit from a sheriff."

"Shut up!" he said tersely, his voice loud in the quiet room. "I'll think of something. Now, pick up the rope, damn you!"

"I won't. You can't expect me to make it that easy for you."

"I could bash in your brains," he said, taking a step forward. Bennett would be blamed. A lovers' quarrel. Everyone knows he has a vile temper. They'd believe he killed another woman."

It could happen, I thought wildly, and then stilled the fear. I could not think of all the possibilities now; I could only try to find a way to escape.

"Jordan's no fool, even if everyone else is. I told him about the sounds I heard. He was suspicious. He didn't believe Prudence was here. Why do you think he was here tonight, Mr. Hallender? He was watching the schoolhouse. Maybe he's watching now."

"I don't believe you," he spat. "You had a lovers' quarrel. That much I heard. And I watched him ride over the hills before I came in through your room. Bennett's gone."

I decided to try another tactic. "What has he ever done to you? Wasn't he your friend? You'd have his death on your conscience as well as mine if the town did put him on trial and hang him."

"Shut your mouth!" he snarled furiously. His gunhand shook violently, and I thought for an instant he was going to pull the trigger without even realizing he did it. He paused, suddenly holstering his gun and grabbing up the rope. I did not hesitate. I bolted past him for the door. He swore, kicked out his bum leg to trip me and grunted in pain. Then his fingers tangled painfully in my hair drawing me up short with a cry. I stumbled, falling to my knees, my scalp stinging.

"Let go! You can't hang me!" I cried, grabbing at his hand. I fought as I felt him trying to sling the noose over my head. I twisted around and kicked out hard with my bare feet. He doubled over, as I struggled up, frantically throwing off the rope. Hallender's fingers came out, grasping almost blindly until they fastened on my nightgown.

"You bitch . . ." he gasped, his eyes blazing. He loosened one hand, doubling it into a fist as it swung at me, catching me across the side of the jaw. I tasted blood as I dropped to my knees. He grabbed my hair, pulling my face up as he hit me again and again. "You had to fight me! Well, your lover Bennett will get blamed for the mess I've made of your face," he said, looping the noose around my neck as I lay on the floor. My fingers clutched at it, but he yanked hard and I gasped for air. He dragged me across the floor. I heard the rope slap against the rafter above and then he was hauling me up, kicking, as my feet were off the floor. The rope burned my neck. I was choking! I fought, the muscles of my arms straining with all their strength.

Then, suddenly, I was falling. I hit the floor hard and rolled. The slackened rope loosened about my neck as my fingers pulled at it. I dragged in air painfully, staring around me for Hallender. I yanked frantically, managing to pull the noose off.

Hallender had knocked over the lantern and it had shattered. Flames licked at his legs and he screamed in pain, animal sounds of agony. When he ran for the door, I did not stop to think of what he had intended to do to me. I chased after him, shouting for him to stop.

Hallender's body was engulfed in flames by the time he reached the street. He staggered and fell. Dropping down next to him, I rolled him over in the mud, trying frantically to extinguish the flames. Lights were going on in houses up the street. People were coming out, staring up at us.

"Help me!" I cried above Hallender's screams of agony. My hands were burned. I frantically rolled him again.

A few people started running up the street. Two men reached me, staring at Hallender in shock. The flames were smothered, and Hallender's screams had changed to moans as he writhed in pain. The exposed flesh was blackened and bloody, the smell of burned skin and muscle sickeningly sweet in the air.

Delirious, he moaned something about a ghost. The ghost he had created. He twisted against the efforts of the men trying to comfort him.

There was nothing else I could do for Tom Hallender. I turned away as two men bent closer to talk to him. I could not bear his agony and stood up. Looking back up the street, I saw flames flickering through the window of the schoolhouse.

"The schoolhouse!" I started to run back.

"Let it burn!" One of the men shouted.

I stopped and turned. "You can't just let it burn. It's my school!"

But no one moved to help. One man said, "I'm not going in that place. Hallender said something about the ghost . . ." Hallender began to scream again as two men lifted him.

I turned away and ran up the path to the front steps. Dashing into the building, I ripped curtains from the front window and slapped at the flames. My arms rose and fell, rose and fell, yet my efforts seemed to only whip the fire into further fury. Running to my room, I grabbed the bucket of water from the stove and threw water over the desk hoping to save something. Smoke was everywhere and I could hardly breathe. Then I thought of the money, savings from farmers and ranchers in the valley around Sycamore Hill. If nothing else could be salvaged, that must be. I managed to reach my room and saw that my precious books were catching fire. I yanked at the mattress and fought to drag it across the floor to the back door. I coughed, my lungs burning.

Where was the rain now? *God, please, let it rain again!* I prayed fervently, jerking frantically at the mattress. It was difficult to drag it through the wet grass to a safe distance. Only when I stopped did I notice that the back end had caught fire. I beat it out with my hands.

Folks need a lot of loving in the morning;
The day is all ahead with cares beset–
The cares we know, and those that give
no warning;
For love is God's own antidote for fret.

Strickland Gillilan
Folks Need a Lot of Loving

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Then blessedly, it did begin to rain. A deluge fell from the black clouds. I sank down, my body shaking with physical exhaustion. I stared bleakly at the schoolhouse still burning in the torrent of rain. The roof was almost gone. The flames reached out the windows, blackening the sides of the building. There would be little worth salvaging by the time the storm extinguished the fire. I sank further down as though the rain were a weight on my shoulders.

Someone lifted me and carried me. My eyes flickered open and I saw people standing around and then walking alongside as I was carried down the street. I heard people talking.

"Is she going to be all right?"

"What happened to her face?"

"Tom Hallender died. Burned to death!"

"But Hallender admitted he had hidden the money in the mattress Miss McFarland dragged out of the schoolhouse!"

The voices rose and fell around me as I wavered in and out of consciousness. My head hurt and I groaned.

"She'll be all right," I heard someone say.

"Take her to Sadie. She can use Miss Greer's old back room," someone else suggested.

A door opened and closed. There was noise and more voices, then silence. Someone touched my brow with soft, gentle fingers. Through a haze of pain and exhaustion, I opened my eyes. Ellen Greer's niece smiled down at me.

"The doc is coming."

I closed my eyes and heard no more.

Most of the swelling of my face from Hallender's beating had gone down after the first two days. The bruises were still ugly, though they were gradually fading to yellow and purple across my cheekbones and eyes. My head no longer hurt.

I had little appetite, and I was depressed and listless. I felt guilty about Sadie's attempts to cheer me. But I had made a decision. I was leaving Sycamore Hill. I could not bear to stay any longer.

A week after I was carried to the boarding house, Reverend Hayes came to see me. I prayed he had not come to argue or sermonize on my shortcomings. He had not and sat down, making a swift study of my bruised face and failing to conceal his horror. Then he got to the point of his visit.

"Doctor Kirk says you're doing well. Will you be ready to start classes in . . . say, another two weeks? The schoolhouse is unusable, I know," he said. "But there's always the church. There's plenty of room there. We could set things up temporarily . . . until a new schoolhouse is built. There are plans underway already."

"Good." A new one should have been built years ago.

"Then you will restart classes?"

"No."

"Do you need more time to recuperate?"

"I've decided to leave Sycamore Hill, Reverend Hayes," I said bluntly. There was no point in delaying the announcement.

Hayes sighed, not the least surprised by my announcement.

"I rather expected this," he said. "But have you thought of the lurch you will leave us all in?"

"I'm sorry about that, " I said sincerely. "But I just can't stay."

"You could at least do us the courtesy of remaining until we find a replacement."

"It was my understanding, Reverend, that it took you and the schoolboard a full year to find me. You neglected to tell me that my predecessor committed suicide and that the entire township thought the schoolhouse was haunted."

Hayes looked annoyed. "I never believed it."

I sighed, "No. Perhaps not." It made no difference now.

"I know we never have gotten along. Is that part of the reason you're leaving?"

"No. I know you want what you feel is best for the children. We just don't agree on some things. I wasn't always tactful," I said.

"Your teaching methods aren't always orthodox," he said, "but the children learned."

"Thank you for that."

"There's no way I can change your mind, Miss McFarland?"

"No. I am sorry."

He stood up. "Good day to you, then, Miss McFarland," He put on his hat and left the room.

I had the bank reward. It was enough to help me start again somewhere else.

I left town by the Oakland stage. Looking back out the side window, I forced a bright smile at friends who had come to say good-bye. The Hayes and Poole boys, Margaret Hudson and her mother, Elvira, Emily Olmstead with Elizabeth Hayes. The stage pulled away from the boardwalk, and I gave a last wave.

Passing the towering eucalyptus that

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marked the south boundary of Eden Rock, I thought of Jordan with such intense longing that I ached. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the seat.

Hour after hour, mile after mile passed. I ate the sandwiches and drank the tea Sadie had prepared and packed for me. Finally, exhaustion overcame discomfort and sleep rescued me from my depressing thoughts of the future.

When I awakened, the stagecoach was stopped. Turning my head I saw the sun dipping toward the west. The driver was talking to someone.

"Just tie your horse up back there. He's lathered pretty bad, isn't he? Looks like you've been riding hard."

Someone answered from the back of the coach where I heard reins slapped against the luggage carrier. I sighed, leaning back again and closing my eyes. I did not feel capable of polite conversation with anyone and decided to feign sleep.

The door opened and the vehicle dipped against the weight of the man stepping in. The wheels creaked and started to roll again.

I felt my silent companion watching me. After a few moments, I opened my eyes slowly. I encountered an intense blue gaze from the dust-covered, sweat-stained man sitting opposite me.

"Jordan!"

"My God! What a run you've given me!" He put his booted foot up on the seat, resting his arm on his knee as he rubbed his beard-shadowed face. He looked drawn with weariness and thinner than I remembered.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"I'm sorry about what happened at the schoolhouse. I hadn't been in town since the night I saw you and all I knew was that it had burned down and you were all right. Then this morning Matthew Hayes rode out to Eden Rock. He told me you'd left this morning on the Oakland stage. Then he . . ." His face was lined as he assessed my face. "Are you really all right now? Matthew said Hallender beat you up. . . . I knew something was going on in that place."

"You don't owe me any apology," I smiled weakly. "I said some terrible things to you."

"About Reva? When my temper had a chance to cool down a little, I knew you had done that because you were afraid. You knew what I wanted."

I flushed and looked quickly down at my hands. My knuckles were white.

"Abby . . ." he said softly. "Abby . . . I'm sorry."

"You . . . you haven't a thing to be sorry about." I shook my head, unable to look up at him again. I wished he had not come. This only made things harder. It only emphasized how much I loved him for the man he was.

"Is that why you're leaving? Because of what happened to you? Or is there something more?"

"Why else?" I asked.

"I thought maybe—" He stopped and looked away.

"What did you think?" I asked, my heart pounding.

His mouth curved in a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I thought maybe you wanted to get as far away from me as you could."

"I suppose that's partly true."

"I deserved that. I've behaved like the biggest ass alive with you," he said. "But I'm going to explain a few things to you."

"You don't owe me any explanations."

"You've got to understand about Gwen."

"No!" I didn't want to hear about his wife.

He continued with his usual ruthless determination. "I was introduced as a young attorney with promise," he said dryly. "I met Gwen's father first; he introduced me to Gwen. She was beautiful and I was attracted to her. So I started seeing her on a regular basis. I thought I loved her enough to marry her. She agreed to my proposal and we were married. When I made plans to return to California, we argued. She tried every kind of argument and pressure to keep me in Boston. I realized then that I didn't really love her, but that's when she told me she was pregnant. She was sure that would change all my plans about returning here, but it didn't. So she miscarried."

Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it.
Love every leaf, every ray of God's light,
Love the animals, love the plants, love everything.
If you love everything, you will perceive the divine
mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to
comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to
love the whole world with an all-embracing love.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky
The Brothers Karamazov

I gasped. "You make it sound like she planned to lose your baby," I said.

"We stayed in Boston for another six months and she conceived Linda. I wanted my child born on the ranch, so we came here despite Gwen's tantrums. She hated everything about California. She was still hoping she could make me go back to Boston, but when she finally realized she couldn't . . . she started to drink. It started as a means of hurting me. Then, I don't think she could stop herself. It was like a sickness. Thank God Reva was there to take care of Linda," he said, looking away.

"During one of her binges, Gwen told me her first pregnancy and the miscarriage had been a neat little invention to keep me in Boston."

I stared at him, horrified. He gazed fixedly out the window.

Bennett finally turned back to look at me. "Do you have any idea how I felt when she told me that? I think I could have killed her, but by that time I pitied her. She couldn't help what she was. She had been reared to put status above everything, to look for a man rich enough and socially accepted enough to give her all her dreams. We didn't want the same things. I swore when she died that no woman would ever get to me again. I'd been a fool over one once, and I wasn't going to be again for any price."

The hardness of his face eased as he looked at me again.

"Then you came along . . . stumbling along the road like some lost, dust-covered waif. You remember what happened?"

"I fell flat on my face," I muttered.

"And you laughed at yourself. I liked you before you ever turned around. And when you did . . ."—he shook his head and the smile softened—"then I realized who you were and knew what would happen if you showed up in town with me by your side. You wouldn't have had a job waiting for you."

"I understood that later. But you might have explained."

"I wasn't in an expansive mood by that time. All I could thing of was what a waste of a beautiful woman. Then I realized where my thoughts were leading."

I concentrated on keeping my expression cool.

"I waited around at the store to make sure you got there all right. Then I tried to explain why I left you walking."

"My reputation," I smiled slightly. "I know. I realized later when Mr.

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Olmstead listed the rules."

"I wanted you to keep your job," he smiled, and there was a look in his eyes that made my heart pound.

"Every time you spoke with that Boston accent of yours, I was reminded of the fact that you were Boston-born and bred. Marriage to the right man . . . love or not. But I was still attracted. I thought myself a fool all over again when I found excuses to see you. The more I saw you, the less you were like what I expected. But every time we met, we argued for some reason or another. Then you accused me of being Diego's father."

I flinched. "I'm sorry."

He gave a harsh laugh. "I was almost glad you believed it," he admitted. "It was the excuse I needed to leave you alone. If you thought all the gossip were true, then I could . . ." He shook his head in self-derision. "It didn't work. I still wanted you, whatever the town was telling you about me. I enjoyed baiting you." He smiled. "It was better arguing with you than making love to anyone else."

He stopped, his eyes searching for something in my face. I concentrated on showing nothing. Want, not love, I reminded myself.

Jordan sighed. "Then the schoolhouse. When I found you outside . . ." He stopped. "And then the business about a ghost. I stayed around that night to watch over you. When I saw the lantern lit, I came in at a run. You were standing there with the light behind you . . . I never wanted anyone so much."

I remembered what he had said to me that night at the schoolhouse. It was true. I was a hypocrite of the worst kind.

"Abby . . ." Jordan said softly. "Abby, please don't look like that." He leaned forward, his hand starting to reach for mine.

"I wanted you so much," he said softly, his eyes not leaving me. "When you pushed me away I got mad." He let out his breath. "I didn't stop to think. When you mentioned Reva . . . that hurt—that you could think that of me. And I wanted to hurt you as badly." He searched my face. "I did, didn't I?" I did not answer.

"And then I just left you alone . . . and vulnerable. And Hallender damn near killed you. My God," he said shakily, and looked up at me with tortured eyes. His hand shook slightly as he reached across to lightly touch my face. "It still shows where he hit you—"

I drew back from his touch, afraid of what I would show. He felt guilty about what had happened to me. I could see that. But it still changed nothing. I forced a smile.

"I'm all right now, really. You mustn't feel you were to blame for what happened."

"Wait, Abby. There's something else . . ." His eyes flickered to mine and then away. This was a side of Jordan Bennett I did not know. He was afraid, and more, he was embarrassed.

"That day at the river. I slapped you, and you ran away."

"I slapped you first," I said quickly.

"I know. But that's no excuse . . . I don't blame you for hating me."

"But I don't hate you. Just tell me why you wanted me to come to you," I pleaded, needing to know and hope filling me.

Jordan did not answer.

"Do you have to go, Abby? Couldn't you change your mind and come back? I wouldn't push you . . ." He stopped and shook his head. "No, I can't promise I wouldn't."

"Jordan, please. Tell me why."

"I guess you deserve your pound of flesh."

"Jordan . . ." I leaned forward and put my hand in his.

"I love you," he said simply.

"Oh, Jordan . . . was that so hard?"

His eyes moved over my face, and he leaned forward so that our faces were close.

"Abby," he said warningly, and I laughed joyously.

"I love you."

Neither one of us moved for a long moment. Then we were kissing, hungrily, unable to get close enough. It was Jordan who finally drew back. He gave me a smile that was filled with love.

"We're almost in Oakland," he said, "and we haven't made plans to—"

I laughed again, feeling joy burst inside me. "Jordan, stop. No more explanations, no plans for now. I love you. Will you leave all that for later and just kiss me?"

He obliged.

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stand still and the world will move

(Continued from page 26)

"Oh, no . . ."

"None of that. Don't be foolish. If I were thirty years younger, I wouldn't be making the sacrifice. But I am not, and it is probably just as well since I was never a perfect person and therefore wouldn't have been right for you. Neither is my nephew—neither right nor a perfect person, but he will serve. You must look in the eyes of other people. You should be shown your reflection again."

I didn't know what to say to him, but as he was seeing me to my apartment, I stopped in the hall and snatched his arm. "Please, Mr. Fuller, I don't think . . ."

"Yes," he said firmly. "Yes, you can."

"I don't want to go out and start it all over again!"

The hall was dark and I couldn't see his eyes through his glasses.

"You will start nothing. You will stand still and the world will move. You are beautiful and you do not even know it. You shut yourself in your room like a jewel in a bank vault. For God's sake, go out and let the world warm itself with you."

His door shut crisply and I stumbled downstairs to my own apartment. I looked in the mirror and I was the same as always. But I felt—almost beautiful?

Perhaps Mr. Fuller is blind, behind his glasses, and obviously he's suffering from a bad case of senile, doting love. But, I thought, isn't it funny, the strange things that pull you through.

Love is the part, and love is the whole;
Love is the robe, and love is the pall;
Ruler of heart and brain and soul,
Love is the lord and the slave of all!

George MacDonald
A Lover's Thought of Love

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Heart in Hand

"Lovely wedding." His voice was quiet and deep, the kind of voice which always had the power to stir her. She looked down into her champagne and nodded, hoping that her eyes were hidden by the wide brim of her hat.

When they both turned to watch Janet and her father walk toward the altar, their eyes had met across the aisle, and she knew that he would approach her later and speak.

Bold, heavy-lidded dark eyes, matching the masculine arrogance of the voice. She told herself she was a fool—a fool for a voice like his, for those eyes and long legs, those heavy shoulders, and for his striking brow and cheekbones.

Her mother, beside her in the pew, had noticed, raising her eyebrows, signaling her to ignore him. She rose with the others, her eyes firmly fixed on Janet's white dress, the broad back and thick red neck of Janet's father, and on David waiting for his bride.

Shafts of sunlight through stained glass, the heavy scent of flowers, music, the soft voices, smiles and tears . . . her throat ached as she stared ahead and still she felt him watching her.

". . . with this ring I thee wed." The beauty of the old words made her catch her breath, and she turned to meet his eyes again, the message in them bringing treacherous color to her face.

A short story by Jill Sanderson

Shameless, she thought. That look on his face. And in church, too. She lifted her chin and looked ahead, her cheeks flaming.

Outside in blinding sunshine, there were photographers everywhere, small girls with posies and rice. Shiny cars were waiting to whisk them all away to the long room filled with more flowers, tables covered with food and drink, and people shaking hands and making jokes.

She sat in a quiet corner and watched her mother across the room, chatting with the bride's parents. She sipped the champagne and tried to forget, hoping that he was among the noisy crowd round the cake, but he had found her.

"Nice girl, Janet," he persisted, and she nodded again. Go away, please. Leave me alone.

"Yes," she said. "She looked lovely."

"You look lovelier. To me anyway."

She looked down at the soft cream suit and matching shoes, the long gloves in her lap. I'm not ready for this, she thought. Please make him go away.

"Relative?" he asked.

She shook her head. "My mother's Janet's godmother."

"I didn't know. I'm not related to David. Just the Tennis Club."

"I know."

Two full glasses appeared, and he took away her empty one. "They're honeymooning in Paris," he told her.

She was silent. She didn't want to hear about the honeymoon, or Paris.

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How dare he know all her thoughts—and send back outrageous answers?

She just wanted him to leave her alone with her pain.

"I'd rather not talk about it," she said. "Would you mind leaving me alone?"

"Yes," he told her. "I'd mind very much."

Then, all of a sudden, he sat on the chair beside her.

"It's been hell." He took her hat off and put it on her lap—wide and frivolous, in cream straw with pink roses round the brim. "I want to look at your hair."

Suddenly she was glad it was newly washed and bright and softly curling against her cheeks. She bore his scrutiny quietly, her heart racing. "I miss you, too."

She studied his face hungrily. He would need a shave soon—by dinnertime his face would be shadowed with stubble. She wondered with whom he would be dining.

He touched her hair lightly. She smiled and said, "There is confetti in yours."

He brushed his hand across his hair, and she reached up and flicked the tiny piece of colored paper from his temple. He turned his face, and his lips brushed against the inside of her wrist.

She caught her breath. "You shouldn't do that."

"I know." He watched her, the confetti in his hand. One of the pieces was a tiny pink heart, almost lost in his big palm. "It's no good. I can't live without you . . ."

"Nor me." She thought for a moment. "We'll always fight though, won't we?"

He nodded. "I know. But it doesn't matter. I want to have you back."

He held out his hand, and she picked up the tiny paper heart and tucked it among the pink roses in her hat. "I wanted to write to you, or telephone."

"I did, too. But I was too pigheaded . . ."

They looked at each other in silence. Now she realized it had all been a conspiracy. She sensed that they were being watched, that her mother was smiling at them from the other side of the room, but she didn't care.

"Promise you'll never let me leave you again," she said.

"I promise."

She leaned her head back against his arm and felt his hand on her shoulder. "You shouldn't have looked at me like that in the church . . ."

He laughed. "You looked so lovely, I couldn't help it. I saw you blushing."

"I hated you when I saw you there. I wanted to run away."

He touched her left hand. "Where's your ring?"

She pulled out the fine chain round her neck and showed him. "I couldn't bear to be without it."

Then he stood up, blotting out everything, the room and the people. "If we leave now, together, it's for keeps. You know that, don't you? Do you want to come?"

She held out her hand and he pulled her to her feet.

"I do," she said.

Illustrated by Richard Sigberman

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Kingman's Lass

(Continued from page 15)

of herself lying beside him, limbs touching, flesh to flesh. The very thought now brought fresh tears until at last she raised her arms to her face to stem the flood. It had started to rain and she turned from the streaming window, kicking aside the fur-trimmed robe. After all, she was still a Kingman and there was much to be done.

The landing looked huge and bare, robbed of its ornaments, its carpets, the mahogany chest that had graced the head of the stair. She paused on the landing and looked down into the hall. It was empty except for the fragments of a broken vase. The thought of her father, broken and left in pieces like the vase, caused a pain in her that made her cry out. "Damn!" she said at the top of her voice. "Damn, damn, damn!"

The answering voice was stern, a little slurred with wine but still the voice of authority. "Come down, Hester Kingman. And put a brake on your tongue."

Her father stood at the foot of the stairs, disheveled and haggard but upright. He passed the back of his hand across his mouth and pursed his lips. "Is there food in the house, lass? Or did they take even that?"

Hester flew along the corridor to the kitchen, the pain she felt for Richard dulled in the joy of her father's recovery. Kingman was himself again and all would be well.

She slept that night on a pile of clothes in the corner of her room, her head resting on a swansdown muff. Downstairs her father sat wolfing bread and cheese, a quill pen in one hand, a fist of papers in the other. She had offered to help, but he brushed her away. "Leave it be," he said. "Tomorrow we'll talk. See to your mother for now." Hester climbed the wide stairs and tiptoed to her mother's room. "Hester?" Her mother's voice was timid and she was close to tears. She sat in the midst of a pile of bedding tumbled on the huge four-poster bed. The sheriffs had left one bed and its linen, one chair, one table—the bare necessities of life. A ruffled cap was perched awry on her mother's hair, and her face peeped out from the flounces of her nightgown. "Hester?" She peered up at her daughter, looking for all the world like a naughty child. "You should be asleep," Hester said reprovingly, trying to convey by her tone that all was well and the Kingman world settled again upon its foundations. "Dada will be up soon and he'll expect to find you sleeping."

Her mother nodded obediently. Then her hands darted beneath the covers and emerged full of treasures—a pearl necklace, a turquoise ring, the pearl and diamond brooch Kingman had bought for her to wear to the Sharratt party, two or three small brooches studded with precious stones, and a kid purse heavy with coins. "Did I do wrong, Hester?"

Hester bent to kiss her mother's inquiring brow. "You did well, Mama. You did very well."

The jewelry was all they had saved from the sheriffs. Furniture, ornaments, silver and fine glass, the books from the library, carriage and horses from the stables—everything was gone. "But we still have the house," Kingman told them the next day, "and by God's grace we'll keep it. The jewelry will fetch a tidy sum, enough to tide us over, and one day I'll replace it with stones that will make this lot look like a pauper's." The passion in his voice left no room for doubt and Hester was comforted by his words.

He was speaking in the master bedroom. The four-poster had become the center of their lives. Her mother stayed safe in its depths and her father sat upon it to eat a breakfast of coarse bread. It was raining outside, a gray day, but the mood in the bedroom was hopeful.

When her father was done, Hester carried the tray out of the room and began to descend the stairs. A rattle of the door knocker caused her to halt on the landing. Richard Sharratt stood in the open doorway. There were raindrops in his pale hair and on his open frock coat. For a moment Hester felt such love for him that it held her rooted to the topmost stair. Then she remembered yesterday—yesterday when she had needed him more than life itself and he had failed her. She descended the remaining stairs and turned toward the kitchen. "What can I do for you, Mr. Sharratt?"

When he answered, his voice was as cold as her own. "I have come to see your father, Miss Kingman, if he can spare me a few moments of his time."

She bit back a sharp retort. There had been no trace of sarcasm in his voice: it was foolish to take offense. Out of sight of the hall she laid the tray down on the bare floor and turned back to her visitor. "We cannot offer you much in the way of comfort, Mr. Sharratt, but if you will wait here my father will come to you." She spoke with all the dignity she could muster, and there was admiration in his eyes. She held her head erect as she climbed the stairs. If he thought the Kingmans were down, he would have to think again.

Kingman and Richard Sharratt were closeted together for an hour. Hester strained her ears but the murmur of voices was indistinct. Once her father laughed and another time she heard him say, "By God, I'll see my day with them yet." But beyond learning that Richard had come in friendship, she could make nothing of their conversation. Later, when Richard had gone, her father told her what he had said. She had watched Richard from the window of her mother's room, his long legs taking the steps two at a time as he hurried to escape the rain. "Richard, Richard," she crooned to herself and wondered how she could continue to love a man to whom she meant nothing.

"No chance of the Scar coal now," her father said. "Not without brass. But the boy's all for us, Hester, I'll give him that. He says he'll get his father to hold back on the deal as long as he can. He won't permanently tie up the Scar coal with anyone else till I'm on my feet again."

And when might that be, Hester thought, but she kept her doubts to herself. That afternoon her father walked into Sedgelake and bought a horse—a tired gray hack, but a horse nonetheless. The following day he rode the twenty miles to Durham City and sold her mother's jewelry. By rights it should have gone to his creditors, but he felt no compunction at the deception. "Vultures," he said. "Couldn't wait to strip the corpse to the bone. Well, we cheated them, Hester, thanks to your mother, and by God we'll see our day with them yet."

The following day the second-hand dealer from Durham City brought chairs, a narrow wooden bed for Hester, pots and pans, and china—none as

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fine as their old possessions but a welcome sight.

Hester set about making a home. It was a challenge and she rose to it. There were no maids to fetch and carry now and her mother was still overcome with shock. It was Hester who swept and polished, picked flowers from the blossoming garden, and arranged them in pots to grace the empty rooms.

"You're occupied, it seems." She looked up one day to see Richard Sharratt regarding her with a quizzical eye. There was dirt on the fancy bodice of her muslin gown, and for all she knew her face might be smudged with dust. None of her fine clothes were suited to her new life, but she had no others.

"There is work to be done," she said briskly and led the way to her father's room. She did not know what to make of Richard Sharratt. He was proving a true friend to her father, but it was obvious that her own attraction for him had vanished with the Kingman wealth.

If he had loved you, he would have spoken for you and the devil take his parents. Her father had not said as much but she knew he thought it. He accepted Richard's help for it was sorely needed, but Hester knew he recognized her grievance and would nurse it in his heart.

By the end of the month her father was back in business, trading cautiously to be sure, but trading nevertheless. Where he had once spoken in thousands, he now spoke in tens, but he was dealing again and his judgment was as shrewd as ever. By night he counted his money. "That's your best friend, Hester," he said one day. "Coin. The only thing that never turns on you."

Hester thought of the thousands lost in Longman's downfall. Little good coin had done him then. Aloud she simply referred to the business of the day and complimented him upon it.

Richard still came to the house but his visits were infrequent, and when she was forced to greet him his manner was as formal as her own. Sometimes she wondered if she had dreamed her love for him, imagined the answering urge in him. A dream or not, he was a stranger now, as impersonal and polite as any she might meet in the streets of Durham City.

It was September when she heard of the flooding at the Scar. She was buying fruit in Mistress Allen's shop in Sedgelake—crisp apples and firm brown pears. She enjoyed the shopping now that it had fallen to her lot, and she was a careful customer. "That be a bad business up at the pit," she overheard a woman saying. The shopkeeper looked grim and nodded. "The young master's gone down, but they say the East face must be shut off."

Hester trudged back up the slope to the village. "The young master"—that was Richard. He was down there in the foulness of the mine. She had not grown up in Durham without hearing of the horrors of the pit — darkness and fetid air, falling stones, and the ever-present water. She could not imagine him in such a setting, not Richard with his fine hands and delicate brow. She glanced across the green fields to where the landscape was scarred with spoil heaps, and the pit workings rose up agains the clouded sky. She was gazing steadily at the shaft when she saw the flame leap twenty feet or more and then the billowing smoke erupt from it. Fire in the mine!

The basket dropped from her hands, and suddenly she was running, stumbling over the tufted grass, her skirts bunched in her two hands. She was not sure why she was filled with a need to get to the pit, but no power on earth could have checked her now.

From far off she could hear the shouting and cursing, barked orders from the foreman, the wailing of the women who huddled at the pit entrance. It was a terrible commotion, with fire-fighting carts and men with stretchers all jostling to get to the remaining shaft. There was a ghastly creaking as the cage bearing the men was brought up. When it appeared in the opening, the women fell upon the men within. There was a stench of burning everywhere and a sharp smell that might have been cotton burning. The spectators eyed her curiously—Kingman's girl in her fine gown, standing at the pit entrance for all the world like a coal miner's lass.

Suddenly her father was there, and his supporting arm went around her waist. "Come away, Hester. This is no place for a lady." She put out a hand and grasped a nearby railing. "I'll not move till he's out, Dada." She said it quietly, but Kingman realized he had no hope of breaking her resolve.

"Aye," he said and knew that his daughter had passed from him.

It was an hour before Richard came up—the last man to leave the pit. His fine shirt was torn and bloodstained and his eyes gleamed white from a blackened face. Hester walked across to him, and the watchers fell away.

"They're out, Hester," he said. "Every last one of them."

She put out a hand to touch his wounded arm. "I waited for you, Richard."

He stiffened then and lifted a weary chin. "Waited, Hester? When you care no more for me than a dozen others you could name? Waited? For a milksop, too pale, too thin—how did it go—too dreamy for a husband?"

For a moment she looked at him blankly, wondering if he had left his reason in the mine below. And then her words came back to her, spoken with such pretended scorn all those weeks before. "I care no more for Richard Sharratt than a dozen others I could name. Too pale, too thin, Dada. Too dreamy for a husband. It's a man I want when I wed, not a milksop."

Richard saw remembrance spring up in her eyes and smiled grimly. "Yes, I heard you Hester. I was away in Durham, but I came just as soon as I heard the news about Longman's. I didn't wait to knock. I came in and heard you and knew myself for a love-sick fool."

Hester would have turned then and walked away, but her father's arm was suddenly firm at her back, steady as English oak. Instead, she lifted her head and spoke out as a Kingman should. "And a fool you are, Richard Sharratt, and a damn fool into the bargain, if you think I meant a word of it. It was meant for my father, to comfort him. Damn you, man! Can't you see?" The words out, she remembered she had been educated as a lady and let her hands fall to the folds of her gown. But her eyes stayed on Richard's face, such a loved and well-remembered face.

Richard stared at her dully, too fatigued to comprehend. Then her words penetrated his tired brain and a smile of pure joy split his begrimed and weary countenance. "If you are sure of your facts, Miss Kingman, it would be discourteous of me to argue. Perhaps I could call upon you and discuss it further." He swayed then and would have fallen had it not been for Kingman's outstretched arms. "We'd better get him home," Hester said calmly and turned to lead the way.

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...And be my love

(Continued from page 23)

When she pulled the plug out of the bath to allow the first washing water to run away, nothing happened. Jenny felt around in the murky water, but nothing seemed to be obstructing the drain. With a sigh, she went outside to investigate. The obstruction was not difficult to find: A piece of dirty rag had been stuffed up the wastepipe from the outside.

She flung the offending rag into the dustbin and went back indoors to finish her washing. She was annoyed to discover that her eyes had filled with tears. Stupid to get upset over such a trivial matter—only she could not help reflecting that the wastepipe had worked perfectly until that afternoon, and there was no doubt that the rag had been introduced from the outside.

The snake strikes again, she thought, blowing her nose and returning to her trampling. But she couldn't help wondering what else was going to happen to frustrate her hopes of settling happily into her new home.

By the time the covers were out and Jenny had finished with the carpet, she was hot, tired, and filthy. The one thing she longed for was a deep, hot bath.

She went into the kitchen first and prepared a casserole, realizing sensibly that she must have one good meal. Then, deciding that it would be better to get the carpet in before she cleaned herself up, she hauled it back and relaid it in the livingroom. It really did look better for its airing and clean up. The new paint was a great success, and the only thing she would have to replace were the curtains.

With a feeling of a job well done, Jenny dragged herself off to the bathroom for a luxurious soak and a shampoo, and then, feeling that it was a pity not to take advantage of what was left of a beautiful, hot day, went out into the garden to get some sunshine and dry her hair.

Which was how Mr. Alderney, drinking a glass of sherry before dining with his son, discovered a delightful vision in the next door garden.

"Lorelei," he remarked thoughtfully, looking out of the window.

"What was that?" asked Geoffrey.

"A fair pretty maid with a comb and a glass in her hand."

Resigning himself to the fact that his father was teasing him, Geoffrey came over to the window to see. It was not difficult to understand why Henry Alderney's attention had been arrested. In the middle of her small lawn, Jenny, wearing a trim yellow bikini, was combing out her long brown hair.

"Dear me," said Geoffrey mildly. He glanced at his father and his lips twitched. "I wonder if I should check your blood pressure? It looks to me as if it might be rising dangerously."

"Yours, of course, remains static?"

"Well . . . I could say it was just another human body, such as I see every day, but I must admit it wouldn't be quite true."

The two men both turned with a ridiculous feeling of guilt when the door opened and Geoffrey's mother came in.

"Geoffrey, your Mrs. Wantage gets more and more difficult!" she exclaimed in irritation. "She practically turned me out of the kitchen when I offered to help."

"Well, she doesn't need help," Geoffrey pointed out. "And you are supposed to be a guest. Sherry?"

"Yes, please. Don't you think it may be time she retired?"

"Heaven forbid. Who would I find to take her place?"

"I dare say something could be arranged. What do you think, Henry?" There was no reply. "Henry?"

Henry Alderney turned round hurriedly.

"You won't get any sense out of Father," Geoffrey informed her. "My next door neighbor has put him into a trance."

Mrs. Alderney looked at him suspiciously, then walked over to the window.

"Oh, I see!" She glanced with amusement at her husband's apologetic expression, then swiftly and unexpectedly kissed him on the cheek. "You look like a little boy outside a sweet shop."

"I'm perfectly satisfied with the sweets I've got," her husband assured her. "I'm only admiring the packaging."

"You told me she was a pretty child, and you were certainly right. I should like to meet her. Let's go out in the garden. Bring the sherry, Geoffrey. Miss Bertram may like a glass."

Jenny, luxuriating in the fresh air and sun, was startled to hear herself hailed from the next door garden. She got up, slipped an old cotton shirt over her bikini, and walked across to them. She smiled warmly at Henry Alderney and with more reserve at his son.

Mrs. Alderney noticed this and felt immediately sympathetic towards Jenny, who accepted the sherry gratefully and, perching herself on the wall, was soon deep in talk with Mrs. Alderney. "I'm becoming quite an expert decorator," she said. "And it's turning out to be easier than I thought—though very hard work."

The talk drifted to other household topics. Henry listened and sipped his sherry, Geoffrey stared absently at his glass, apparently paying little attention to the conversation, although he did look up with an involuntary smile when Jenny gave them a description of her antics in the bath, trampling her washing.

A voice broke in on their amusement. "I guessed I'd find you in the garden, so I came round the side."

Wanda Petrie had arrived, looking very cool and well-groomed in green linen. She registered surprise, just a little too exaggerated, at the sight of Jenny perched on the wall.

"I hope I'm not late," Wanda said. "I stopped to leave old Mrs. Pringle's medicine, Geoffrey, and she kept me talking forever."

Alice Alderney turned to Jenny to explain. "There's a scheme for people with transport to take prescriptions into Bardenford, get them made up and bring them back. It seems to work quite well, doesn't it, Geoffrey?"

He hesitated. "It's not ideal, but it works well enough."

It was Wanda who had to make the obvious point. "It's far from ideal," she exclaimed. "And, of course, we had hoped the necessity for it would have come to an end if only I could have been installed in Berry Cottage."

Jenny flushed uncomfortably. "I'm sorry about that," she said. "But perhaps I could do something to make up for it. I shall be going into Bardenford every day."

"It's good of you to offer," Geoffrey said with perfunctory courtesy. "But I think on the whole it is better if we confine the list to more mature people."

Henry raised his eyebrows, and his wife drew in her breath sharply. Geoffrey appeared as unaware of their reaction as he was of Wanda's small, approving smile, but looking up and catching Jenny's look of hurt bewil-

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derment, he knew a momentary compunction. "If there's ever an emergency I shall have no hesitation in calling on you," he added hurriedly.

It was small concession, but it enabled them to pass over the awkward moment. Jenny did not stay with them much longer. She excused herself and beat a retreat to her former seat on the grass.

Wanda was not content with her minor victory, and she remarked in what was intended to be a lightly conversational tone, "What an outrageously vulgar getup! Just like one of those girlie magazines!"

She looked round at Geoffrey, expecting approval, but encountered a look of such profound distaste that her complacency was seriously shaken.

"One thing of which I would certainly not accuse Jenny Bertram is vulgarity," he said. "Surely she's entitled to sunbathe in her own back garden?"

It was not a successful evening, in spite of Mrs. Alderney's valiant attempts. She drew a breath of relief when she and her husband were finally on their way home in the car.

"I really can't get on with Wanda," she complained. "Tiresome creature."

"Geoffrey seems to be seeing a lot of her," Henry remarked gloomily. "I only hope he doesn't mean to marry her."

"There are times when I feel they richly deserve one another," Alice said. "How Geoffrey could have spoken to that nice child in the way that he did . . . !"

"I think he regretted that," Henry said. "It was certainly tactless."

"Tactless! It was rude and unkind." She sighed. "I try to make excuses for him, but really . . . it's time he got over Angela's death. The accident was terrible, of course. It was a shock to all of us, but Geoffrey has been like stone ever since."

"He was in love with the girl."

"Yes, but Wanda recovered from the death of her husband."

"Probably never cared much for him. Do you suppose Geoffrey is making her drive herself home?"

"I'm sure he is. His manners are atrocious." She shook her head over her graceless son, and they abandoned a subject which gave neither of them much satisfaction.

The following day was Jenny's first at her new job. She allowed herself plenty of time, in case there were any broken milk bottles or other disasters, but nothing marred her first two days at work. She found she was enjoying the small office. The other two secretaries and the receptionist were all friendly, and Bob Prestow was grateful for everything she did for him.

As for Geoffrey, he had an uneasy conscience over his treatment of Jenny, and every sight of her reminded him of it. It would have been convenient if he could have ignored her completely, but this was difficult when they lived in such close proximity. He was certainly unable to ignore her one evening later that week when she climbed stiffly off her bike, dripping wet and shivering with cold. He had just returned home himself, and he had to get out of his car to open the gate. The fine weather had broken that afternoon in a thunderstorm, and the temperature had dropped drastically. The rain was still falling heavily, and a gust of wind sent it scudding into his face.

He hunched his shoulders and hurried back to the car just as Jenny propped up her motor bike at the curb. She was wearing her usual jeans and shirt and was obviously soaked to the skin.

"Good heavens, have you ridden in from Bardenford like that?" Geoffrey demanded incredulously. "You must be out of your mind!"

Common as light is love, and its familiar
voice wearies not ever . . .
They who inspire it most are fortunate
As I am now; but those who feel it most
Are happier still.

Percy Bysshe Shelley
Prometheus Unbound

"Somebody pinched my cape and leggings," Jenny flashed at him, almost incoherent with rage. "I checked specially to make sure they were in my saddlebag this morning because anyone could see there was going to be a storm, and this evening they were gone."

"What bad luck. Well, neither of us will get any drier standing here. Hurry indoors and have a hot bath and a good meal, or I'll be treating you for pneumonia."

Jenny groaned. "Oh, don't!"she said. "The one thing I long for is a bath, and I can't have one because the water heater was taken today. I had to replace it, and the new one won't be ready until tomorrow."

Something about Jenny's woebegone figure made Geoffrey pause. He had no wish to get involved in her troubles, but his professional eye noted her pallor and the tremors that shook her body.

He spoke impulsively, almost before he knew what he was saying. "Get yourself some dry clothes and come in to my place and have a bath."

"Are you sure?" Jenny asked doubtfully.

"Yes, of course. A hot bath is easy treatment compared to what you'll need if you don't thaw out soon. Hurry along now!"

Jenny needed no further urging. She was back at Geoffrey's door almost before he had time to get indoors.

"I nearly came over the back wall," she said breathlessly. "It would have been much quicker, but I thought Mrs. Wantage might be startled."

"It's Mrs. Wantage's day off," he said. "So you needn't bother about her. Straight up the stairs, first door on the right. Got everything you need?"

"Yes, thank you."

It was half an hour before Jenny appeared in the kitchen where Geoffrey was absentmindedly poking at the potatoes boiling on the stove. He gave her a considering look.

"That's better. You look quite human again. Are you hungry?"

"Mm, yes." She saw that he had laid the table for two.

"I usually eat in the kitchen when I'm on my own," he said. "Mrs. Wantage leaves me a stew that I can reheat. There seems to be plenty for two. Want some?"

"Yes, please. That is, if I won't be a nuisance?"

"Of course you won't. I'm not in any hurry tonight—no evening surgery."

"Can I do anything?"

"No, I don't think so. I only have to light the oven, boil the potatoes, and dish up."

"Then I shall sit down like a lady and let myself be waited on."

"You do that." He carried the saucepan over to the sink and, as he was draining the potatoes, asked casually, "Have you reported the theft of your rainwear to the police?"

"No."

"You will, of course—and the sooner the better."

There was no reply from Jenny.

"You are going to the police?"

"I'm not sure." Jenny gave him a harassed look. She was deeply upset, and she longed to confide the whole story to someone. Geoffrey, for all his difficult ways, inspired a certain degree of confidence. Haltingly, she began to describe the incidents which

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had been troubling her.

Geoffrey frowned. "What makes you think this theft was part of the same campaign?"

"There was a note."

"What sort of note?"

"Anonymous. Printed in capital letters. It said, 'People like you need drowning. See how you like getting wet.'"

"Unpleasant."

She looked down at her plate. "I thought so. I was angry, but I was hurt, too."

"Let's have some food," Geoffrey said, with unaccustomed gentleness. "I'm a bit at a loss, I must admit. I thought I knew most of the cranks around here, but none of them fits this particular bill."

"I can't understand why anyone should resent me so much."

"I must say the whole thing strikes me as being pretty childish," Geoffrey said. "But there's a sort of sickness about it that worries me. And today's incident was more serious. I imagine it will cost you quite a bit to replace the cape and leggings?"

Jenny grimaced. "Yes. I'll have to manage without for a few days. I only hope the weather improves."

"If it doesn't, you really ought to go to work by bus, you know. This evening you were in a state which made you a potential danger on a motorbike."

"You think I could have had an accident."

"I wouldn't have placed much dependence on the quickness of your reactions if you had been faced with a sudden emergency."

Jenny was forced to agree with him.

"Still, I've made a splendid recovery," she pointed out. "The stew would put fresh heart into anyone. Mrs. Wantage is certainly a good cook. Has she been with you long?"

"Ever since I took this house. She's a quiet woman; very reserved. I don't think anyone knows her very well, although she's lived in the village all her life. But we were discussing what you should tell the police."

"Were we? I suppose I must go to them."

"Yes, you must. If you don't report it, I will."

Jenny eyed him resentfully. "I can handle this myself. I don't know what people are always trying to take over my problems when I can perfectly well manage on my own."

Geoffrey looked at her carefully. She had changed into a long cotton skirt and a thin red sweater. She had scooped up her long hair with a couple of pins and then obviously forgotten about it, so that it hung in careless strands about her small, flushed face.

"You look so ridiculously young," he said.

"I'm nineteen!" Jenny pointed out to him indignantly.

"Infant! You make me feel a hundred. Do you want any more stew?"

"No, thank you."

Jenny accepted an apple and ate it in silence, still faintly annoyed at the inability of the world to take her seriously. She unbent slightly when Geoffrey suggested having coffee in the livingroom.

"Do you want me to make it?" she asked.

"No. Go and make yourself comfortable and I'll bring it through."

Dismissed, Jenny wandered through into the livingroom as he had suggested, while Geoffrey prepared the coffee and set out the tray. The breakfast cups he normally used looked thick and utilitarian this evening for some reason, and he searched around for something more delicate.

He found what he was looking for and made a mental note to have this better china brought out more often. Perhaps he had allowed himself to become indifferent to his surroundings.

He carried the tray through to the livingroom.

"What pretty cups!" Jenny exclaimed. "I don't suppose you use them every day, do you?"

"I can't remember having seen them before. I expect my mother bought them for me. I think they're intended for visitors—and I don't get all that many."

"They really are nice. I do like pretty china. Great-Aunt Henrietta was supposed to have left a tea and dinner service, but she must have got rid of it. I was quite disappointed when it couldn't be found."

"You don't by any chance like music?" Geoffrey asked.

He did not sound particularly hopeful of her answer, Jenny noticed. "Yes, I do like music," she replied with careful patience.

"I mean classical music," Geoffrey explained, making it worse.

"So do I."

The crispness of her response got through to him, and he said, "Well, I wasn't sure . . . I didn't want to bore you, but I bought Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* this afternoon and I was rather looking forward to hearing it."

"Is that the new van Karajan recording?"

"Yes. Have you heard it already?"

"No, I just happened to have noticed there was a new recording out. I was interested because I've sung it."

"Have you really? So have I. Years ago. You know, there's a choral society in Bardenford. Why don't you join that?"

"Do you think I could?"

They listened in silence, equally absorbed. Jenny tucked her feet up under her on the sofa; Geoffrey lounged in his favorite armchair, his head tilted back to gaze at the ceiling without really seeing it.

He glanced round once and, catching Jenny's eye, gave her a fleeting, abstracted smile. I might just as well not be here, she thought ruefully. Geoffrey had been kind this evening, but there was no real warmth in his attitude.

She glanced at him again, surreptitiously. He was not unattractive, with his thin, rather sallow face, and the straight dark hair which flopped engagingly into his eyes.

Jenny gave herself a mental shake and applied her mind to the music, but at that moment their peace was shattered by the telephone.

Geoffrey groaned. He went to answer the call and came back, frowning slightly. "I shall have to go," he said. "It's the Herman child. I'm sorry, but it's serious. Don't go. Stay and hear the end. I'll be back before long."

Geoffrey was gone far longer than he had hoped, and he returned to an empty house. He saw that the dishes had been washed and stacked neatly, even the cushions had been plumped up tidily. Geoffrey stood in the middle of his silent room and was appalled by his sense of deprivation.

It was unfortunate that the friendlier relations between Jenny and Geoffrey were severely strained the following weekend. It began amicably enough when Jenny called at the house on Friday evening to let Geoffrey know that her waterproof clothing had been found.

"I'm pleased to get my things back, of course," she said. "But it was rather horrible. They were thrown into the sea. Someone saw them floating and thought that it was somebody drowning. The police did a rescue act and found it was only my empty cape and leggings."

"Nasty. Did you tell them about the other incidents?"

"I did, but I had the feeling they weren't taking it very seriously, I'm to

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let them know if anything else happens."

"Well, mind you do."

It was on the tip of his tongue to offer her a drink, but he had had to work that evening and was not in the mood for the social scene. Nor would Mrs. Wantage take kindly to an unexpected visitor just as she was ready to serve his dinner. She had not been pleased by the orderly state of her kitchen when she returned on Thursday night.

"Someone's been in my kitchen, it seems," she had said suspiciously.

"What makes you think that?"

Mrs. Wantage sniffed. "If you did the washing-up, it's the first time, Doctor! Besides, two of everything's been used, though I see it's none of it been put away."

"I suppose Miss Bertram wasn't sure where you kept things. I had to go out."

"Oh, it was her, was it? I thought it wouldn't take her long to come creeping in here."

She was stowing away the plates in a way that promised them a short life. Suddenly there was a pause and she said in an altered voice, "You've been using my china!"

She was holding one of the green-bordered cups in her hand, and Geoffrey felt extraordinarily guilty.

"I'm sorry, I had no idea . . . I thought I hadn't seen those cups before, but I didn't realize they were yours."

"I do have a few bits and pieces, even though I haven't got a house of my own to keep them in."

The day after this exchange was decidedly not the time to be asking Jenny Bertram into the house again, so Geoffrey let it go, and Jenny went away with the vague feeling of dissatisfaction that always arose from her meeting with Geoffrey.

Sunday began badly when Jenny overslept, worn out by her house-painting exertions of the day before. She woke at nearly nine o'clock, with badly aching muscles.

Her plan for the day was to tackle the kitchen, and that involved a lot of furniture shifting, which was not easily tackled on her own. She thought of asking Mick Cross to help, but for all his vigor he was elderly. It never even crossed her mind to call in her other neighbor.

At about midday her labors were interrupted. She was beginning to feel hot, tired, and rather cross about her inability to move the kitchen dresser, when the doorbell rang.

On the doorstep arguing vociferously were her ex-flatmates Sandra and Betty and their current boy friends, Roy and Bill. As soon as she appeared, Roy swung her off her feet and gave her a resounding kiss.

"Put that girl down," Sandra demanded. "She's probably been out tending the pigs since five o'clock this morning."

"Are you surprised to see us?" Betty asked.

"Surprised isn't the word," Jenny said faintly. "Horror-struck is more like it. Why on earth didn't you let me know you were coming?"

"You're not on the telephone," Sandra replied.

"We only thought of it yesterday," Betty added.

"Hey, she's had an earthquake!" Bill called out as he reached the kitchen.

"I'm turning it out, so that I can wash the walls down," Jenny explained. "I could do with some help shifting this heavy furniture. You've come just at the right time."

"We're not going to waste all this sunshine working indoors, are we?" Sandra demanded. "I'm counting on your country air to give me a tan."

"This isn't a bad place," Roy remarked. "I wouldn't mind it myself, just for weekends. What do you want shifted, honeybun?"

"The dresser—and don't call me that, you know I hate it."

"Right you are, sweetie pie. C'mon Bill, from me, to you."

It did not take long for the two boys to move the furniture. Jenny was grateful to them, and said so.

"So now we've worked up a thirst, where's the pub?" Roy demanded.

"Only five minutes away. Look, why don't you boys go and have a pint while I show Betty and Sandra the rest of the cottage and think about what we're going to eat?"

"We could get some bread and cheese at the pub if you can't feed us," Bill offered.

Jenny gave him a slightly warmer look. At least it had occurred to one of her thoughtless friends that the unannounced arrival of four guests might tax her resources. "I think I can manage," she said cautiously. "I'll hard-boil some eggs and get another lettuce from Mick Cross next door."

"Oh, let's have a picnic in the garden," Sandra suggested.

Which was how the peace of Geoffrey Alderney's Sunday afternoon came to be disrupted. It had not been easy to drag the boys away from the Dog and Fox, and Sandra was still smoldering as she helped Jenny carry the food out into the garden. Her mood was not improved by Roy's loud appreciation of the makeshift meal.

"You always were a smashing little cook," he told Jenny. "We miss you back at the flat."

"Why don't you come back, Jenny?" Betty asked. "You could keep this place as a weekend cottage."

"I want to live here," Jenny replied. "Not just use it for visits."

"Don't you find it a bit quiet? What do you do in the evenings?"

"There are all sorts of things I can do," Jenny said firmly, but vaguely, being none too sure of the answer herself.

"Knitting?"

"Good works?"

"Church choir?"

"I might just," Jenny flashed, incensed.

Her response struck her friends as hilarious, and they shrieked with laughter, while Jenny, rather pink in the face, began gathering up the debris of their meal.

Geoffrey Alderney had intended taking a book into the garden for a quiet read, but when Roy went and fetched Jenny's radio and loudly tuned in a pop program, he abandoned that idea and decided to cut the grass instead. The exercise would do him good.

"Who's that man next door?" Sandra asked.

"Dr. Alderney."

"Married?"

"No."

"Not bad looking. Have you met him?"

"I don't see much of him. He's too busy to bother with being sociable."

"No man's ever too busy to take notice of a bird like you," Roy commented lazily.

"Why don't you go and do the washing up?" Sandra demanded.

"Why don't you? I'm going to sleep."

He lay down, his arms behind his head, and closed his eyes. Bill followed his example.

By the time Jenny's visitors left, she was relieved to see them go.

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At the gate, Bill gave her a quick hug. Roy went one better. He swept her off her feet and gave her a resounding kiss. Jenny struggled free from his embrace, more than a little annoyed with him.

It was a pity that this happened just when Geoffrey Alderney opened his gate and stepped out. Under his fleeting, sardonic glance Jenny felt even more put out with her visitors. She got no more from Geoffrey than a twitch of his thin eyebrows and a curt unsmiling nod.

Geoffrey was making for the solitude of the Downs. He was desperately short of sleep and had been for several nights, but he knew that it would be a mistake to go to bed in the daytime. Far better to knock himself out with physical fatigue first.

To this end he set out for the top of the hill, and was disgusted to find at the end of half an hour that he was already tiring. He sat down then, and contemplated the scene in front of him, where the ground fell away in one vast, unbroken sweep. The sea lay out of sight, only a certain clarity of light on the horizon betraying its presence.

Back at the cottage, Jenny contemplated the ruin of her day. Too late to start washing walls! With sudden impatience, she decided to turn her back on the whole thing and go for a walk. It would do her good to get away from the confines of the house for a while.

She took the same path Geoffrey had followed, the obvious choice since it started from the end of their road. She had ventured up it only once before, and this time she took the right-hand fork instead of the left one.

The path broadened and climbed steadily uphill, cultivated fields on one side, open ground on the other. The strong, gray-green curves were a revelation to her.

It was inevitable that she should encounter Geoffrey, since he was sitting by the side of the path. He heard her coming and looked up. Jenny would have passed him with no more than a smile and murmured greeting if, to her surprise, he had not got to his feet and joined her.

"Are you going far?" he asked.

"I hardly know. Is it far to the end of the path?"

"About four days' walk," he told her gravely. "Eighty-seven miles in all, from Petersfield in Hampshire to Eastbourne."

"And you can actually walk the whole length of it?"

"Indeed you can. I frequently recommend it to my more obese patients."

"Kill or cure?"

"They don't usually take me very seriously."

They walked on again, side by side, Geoffrey relapsing into an abstracted silence. Since he did not want to talk, Jenny kept quiet and took in this new scene.

When a rabbit scuttled across their path, she turned to Geoffrey with a delighted smile. He returned it, amused by her pleasure, and grateful, through a haze of fatigue, for the undemanding quality of her companionship.

They dropped down into a hollow and then climbed steadily up the other side, out in the open now, with sweeping hills all round them. "This is as far as I mean to go," Geoffrey said. "If we take this path to the left we can work our way back in a circle."

"I'll turn back with you," Jenny decided. "I only came out to work off my bad temper over my wasted day."

"Weren't you pleased to see your friends?" Geoffrey asked, vaguely surprised.

"Not particularly. If I'd known they were coming, or if they'd waited until I got straight, it would have been different. As it was, they were a thorough nuisance."

"I expect your boy friend was keen to see you in your new home."

"Neither of them was my boy friend," Jenny told him shortly. "I wouldn't touch them with a barge pole." She remembered Roy's kiss. "Well, not from choice, anyway."

"I see. So you want a rest before we turn back?"

"It would be nice to sit down."

"Well, I need a rest!" Geoffrey lay down full-length and closed his eyes.

"You've been having some disturbed nights, haven't you?" Jenny asked quietly. "I've heard your car."

Geoffrey rolled over and leaned his head on his arm, his eyes fixed on a hawkweed. "That child I was called out to the other evening when you were with me—" he said abruptly— "he died at four o'clock this morning."

The breath caught in Jenny's throat. "My dear . . ." she said, and then stopped, appalled by the inadequacy of words. Geoffrey did not appear to have heard her. "One never quite grows accustomed," he said slowly. "I know in my heart that everything humanly possible was done, and yet . . . it's hard to take, especially when one has done one's best to help. Acceptance of one's inadequacy is the hardest thing of all to face."

Jenny could think of no response. Geoffrey cast a fleeting look at her troubled face. "Nice of you to be concerned," he said. "I ought not to have told you."

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . hardly fair to burden you with what isn't your business."

"But people need to talk to one another—even you!" Jenny exclaimed.

"Maybe. But I prefer to keep my troubles to myself."

Jenny frowned. "I think that you fight too hard to prove yourself superior to perfectly natural feelings. A child you were treating has died, and you are upset. Well, of course you are! Perhaps you even feel in some way responsible. Your conflict lies in the difference between what you really feel and what you think you ought to feel—which seems to be a sort of icy indifference!"

"Not indifference—detachment. I ought to be able to achieve that."

"Not at the expense of ordinary human feelings. It's not worth it," Jenny said with conviction.

"This is an old argument," Geoffrey said wearily. "And you and I are not likely to resolve it this evening. You mean well, Jeanny, but aren't you a bit young to be holding yourself out as an authority on bereavement?"

Jenny was very still. "My mother died when I was twelve," she said. "And my father and stepmother were killed in an air crash eighteen months ago. It's a subject on which I am entitled to have an opinion."

Geoffrey looked at her with something approaching horror. "My dear child! I beg your pardon, from the bottom of my heart. Of course, if I had thought at all about your circumstances, I would have realized . . . I am truly sorry."

"It wouldn't have been difficult for you to find out," Jenny said. "Your father knows all about me. But it never occurred to you, did it, to ask why I wanted Berry Cottage? If you could take me out of that neat little compartment you've put me into, the one labeled 'Too young to be taken seriously,' and think of me as a person, then perhaps you could accept me as a neighbor and allow me to offer you my sympathy."

"I'm not ungrateful for your interest," Geoffrey said with obvious reluctance. "But my experience has been that it's better not to lean on other people."

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"Poor disillusioned old man!" Jenny mocked him, and then she recalled having heard something about his fiancée being killed in a motor accident. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't that, of course."

"No. Well, not to worry." Geoffrey lay back on the turf again. "Perhaps there's something in what you say. And I must admit talking to you has been a . . . sort of comfort."

Jenny waited, but he said nothing more, neither did he move. There was a long silence. Exhausted by his broken nights and the burden he had carried, Geoffrey had fallen asleep. Jenny decided that it would be best to allow him to sleep here, at least for a time.

She was starting to grow stiff and a little chilly, when Geoffrey began to stir. She bent over him , her long hair brushing against his cheek.

Geoffrey floated up through a pleasant dream. He was under water; strands of seaweed brushed his face, and there was a mermaid. "Pretty creature," he said, thickly but approvingly.

He put up a wavering hand, heavy with sleep, and pulled her down to be kissed.

Suddenly he was brought back to full consciousness as much by the contact with warm, human flesh as by Jenny's startled snort of laughter as her nose bumped against his chin.

He sat up, appalled by the predicament he was in. Jennie sat back on her heels, her eyes dancing.

He looked so harassed that Jenny took pity on him.

"Think nothing of it," she told him cheerfully. "My fault for intruding on your dreams. Do you feel any better?"

"Funnily enough I do. But you must have been bored to tears."

"No, not at all. I watched things."

"What things?"

"Some ants scurrying about, and the bees on the clover, and the skylarks going up and down, and the clouds. Really, I couldn't have been more contented."

They began to walk back the way they had come.

"Look, those are the first people I have seen since I came up here," Jenny said, pointing to two riders on horseback. "Do you ride?"

"I used to, but . . ."

"I know, don't tell me, you've given it up! That's what you say every time I ask you if you do something: You used to, but you've given it up. I had no idea being a doctor was such a hard life!"

"Well, it's fairly demanding," Geoffrey said stiffly.

"Don't you have a partner?"

"Only on a part-time basis. A friend fills in for me when necessary, and does some of the visiting. I take Thursday and Saturday evenings and all day Sunday off, barring emergencies, but apart from that it's a full-time grind." Geoffrey came to a sudden halt. "My walking stick. I've left it behind." He looked back at the hill they had descended. "I shall have to go back for it. It belonged to my grandfather, and I'm rather attached to it. Walk on slowly—I may catch up."

Geoffrey hurried back up the hill, not altogether sorry to get away; he had taken enough advice for one day.

The stick was where he expected to find it. He was stooping down to pick it up when its appearance arrested his attention. It was an old stick, brought back by his grandfather from Africa, and made of hard, knobbly wood, with a natural crook handle which had been carved into the likeness of a snake's head, with two pieces of red glass for eyes. Half-hidden in the long grass, it had a strangely lifelike appearance.

A brown snake, he thought. A brown snake with red eyes, exactly what young Jimmy Goodson had described as responsible for knocking over Jenny's milk bottles. As Geoffrey picked up the stick his mind grappled with this extraordinary idea. Because the only other person with access to the stick at that hour was his housekeeper.

He deliberately lingered to think over this strange turn of events. It was conceivable that Mrs. Wantage could have stuffed a rag up the drainpipe as well, but he wondered about the theft of Jenny's waterproof clothing, until he remembered that happened on Mrs. Wantage's day off, when it was all too likely that she was visiting Bardenford.

But what could her motive be? The only thing Geoffrey could think of was mistaken loyalty to him. She knew he was disappointed over the loss of the cottage, knew, too, that he had no great opinion of the character of the new owner—he blamed himself for having made no secret of that—but it was almost beyond belief that she would go to such lengths to drive Jenny away. Especially for him, Geoffrey admitted to himself. His relations with his housekeeper were amicable, but cool.

All the same, it was true that Mrs. Wantage had been strange lately.

He was glad that he didn't see Jenny on the way home. He wanted to think it over before he spoke to her. In fact, he rather thought he would say nothing to her at all, unless there was any further unpleasantness, and he hoped to prevent that by a little talk with his housekeeper.

It was not easy to bring the subject up, and he did not feel sufficiently sure to come out in the open and accuse Mrs. Wantage.

He sought her out in the kitchen, laid the stick on the table and said, "When Miss Bertram first moved in next door she had a couple of pints of milk broken by what young Jimmy Goodson described as a 'snake with red eyes.' " He picked up the stick. "Rather an odd coincidence, don't you think?"

Mrs.Wantage did not meet his eyes. "I suppose you could call it that."

"There were other things: a rag stuffed up the drainpipe; the loss of her rain cape and leggings. Now that was more serious and could have led to an accident."

"She got her things back, or so I've heard."

"She did, but that's beside the point. Mrs. Wantage, I admit I did not look forward to having her as a neighbor at first, but now that I know her better . . ." He hesitated. "I find her very pleasant to deal with," he added firmly. "I am perfectly reconciled to the loss of the cottage . . ."

"It never was yours!"

"Precisely. It never belonged to me, and I had no right to expect Jenny to give it up to me. I don't want to hear any more about it."

He got nothing but a mulish look from Mrs. Wantage, but she had had a warning, and provided there were no more incidents he was prepared to let it go at that.

He baulked at the idea of admitting to Jenny that his own hostility had driven his housekeeper to such childish acts. He was rather keeping away from Jenny at the present time. That kiss had introduced a new element into their relationship, and it was entirely his own fault. Actually, Geoffrey was suffering from a very masculine annoyance with himself for having made such a mess of it. And she had laughed! Just as well to keep out of her way as much as he could. She was a very disturbing young lady.

But Geoffrey was suddenly reminded of Jenny one day when he was visiting one of his younger patients. Andy Bates was recovering from chicken-pox.

"What's the matter with you, Andy?" Geoffrey asked, surprised by his woebegone face. "According to medi-

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cal science, you are supposed to be better."

"I'm all right," Andy muttered.

"He's sulking because I've told him we've got to get rid of that cat," Andy's mother said.

"It's not a cat, it's a kitten," Andy said.

"Our Tabby had kittens," Mrs. Bates explained. "We got rid of four of them . . ."

"My dad drowned them," Andy put in.

"We let her keep one, thinking we'd find a home for it later, but no one seems to want a kitten, and I'm not keeping two cats around the house."

Andy felt under the loose pullover he was wearing and pulled out a small kitten. "Sam likes it inside here with me because it's warm, see."

It was an engaging little creature, black with a white bib and one white paw, a triangular face and enormous blue eyes.

"You remind me of someone," Geoffrey muttered, tickling it.

The kitten unsheathed a paw full of needles and raked the back of his hand. Geoffrey pulled his hand away quickly. "Yes, a striking likeness," he said. "Andy, I think I might know of a home for your kitten."

"You won't take him away and do him in?"

"No, I won't do that," Geoffrey promised.

"I don't mind so much about the little 'uns," Andy said. "But you can't drown a kitten after he's grown up into a person, can you? His name's Sam."

"Sam? Right. Shall I take him now?"

A shoe box was found, and Sam was put into Geoffrey's car mewing frantically.

"Shut up," said Geoffrey. "If it weren't for me you'd be meeting a sorry end."

He hurried up Jenny's garden path.

"Have you still got mice?" he asked as she opened the door.

"I've got super-mice," Jenny said gloomily. "Highly trained, intelligent mice who can remove cheese from traps without disturbing the spring."

"In that case would you like a kitten?"

Cautiously, he raised the lid of the shoe box, and Sam's indignant head popped out.

"Oh, what a little darling!" Jenny exclaimed, stretching out her hands.

"Careful, he stratches!" Geoffrey said. "Will you take him? His name is Sam."

"Yes, I'd love him," Jenny said.

"Thank goodness for that!" Geoffrey said. "Look, I must fly."

He cut short her thanks and hurried away.

Two days later, Mrs. Wantage brought an envelope in to him when she gave him his dinner.

Geoffrey slit it open. Inside was a small, green booklet and, attached to it, a slip of paper with "To thank you for giving me Sam—Jenny" written on it. Combing through a box in front of a secondhand bookshop, Jenny had come across a small treasure, and had bought it as a present for him. He looked at the book, surprised and touched by her gesture. "Primitive Physic," it was called. He opened it.

"Two pennyworth of tarred twine worn round the neck in a white bag will prevent a cold leaving the head and entering the chest," it promised. He was about to put the little book to one side, his face alight with amusement, when another sentence caught his eye: "Wear a dried toad in the armpit and it will ward off fever." Geoffrey laughed, delighted.

He caught Jenny at the gate a few days later, just as she was about to leave for work.

"How's Sam?" he asked.

"Sam is a cannibal. He eats bare toes," Jenny told him. "I came downstairs in the morning and was attacked by this wild animal."

"He attacks mice, too, I hope?"

"I think so. At any rate, they don't seem to be quite so active—and he's marvelous company."

"Thank you very much for the little book."

"Oh, did you like it?"

"It's a joy. I carry it in my pocket. I was looking out for you," he added. "The postman seems to have got our letters mixed up." He handed over an envelope.

He was unprepared for the eagerness with which she took it from him, or for her delighted smile. "Oh, thank you!"

"Don't look so pleased," Geoffrey remarked. "It looks suspiciously like a bill to me."

"It is." Her disappointment was so palpable that he felt compelled to ask. "Were you expecting something special?"

"Oh, no, not really. It's just . . . it's my birthday, you see. It doesn't matter, of course, but I thought somebody would have remembered."

She gave him a very small smile and began to fasten her safety helmet.

"I see. Well, happy birthday, Jenny."

"Thank you. I must be off. Have a good day."

He went back to work, his mind oddly troubled by the memory of that small, hurt smile. By the middle of the morning he could stand it no longer. He made two telephone calls in rapid succession. The second was Jenny.

"Jenny, have you made any plans yet for celebrating your birthday this evening?"

"No, none," she answered in surprise.

"In that case, will you come out to dinner with me? I've already booked a table at Harcourt Manor, so please don't say no."

"It's terribly kind of you." It was more than that, it was astonishing, but she hurried to accept. "Yes, of course, I'd be delighted."

"Good. Can you be ready by seven-thirty?"

"Yes, any time you like."

"Good. And Jenny . . . Harcourt Manor is not a place to which one wears jeans."

"I wouldn't dream of it!" she exclaimed hotly, but he had already put the telephone down, exasperating man.

She managed to find out a little more about this place to which he was taking her by asking Bob Prestow.

"Harcourt Manor? My word, a very high class joint, indeed. The house is centuries old, but it's only been open as a restaurant the last eighteen months or so. The food is fantastic, and so are the prices." He looked at her curiously. "Who's introducing you to the high life, sweetie?"

"Oh, someone just happened to mention it to me," Jenny replied airily.

At lunch Jenny went shopping in search of something worthy of what was obviously a rather grand restaurant. She found a dress that was so stunning she could not resist it. It was going to knock his eyes out. Jenny had a strong suspicion that, in providing her with the equivalent of a birthday, Geoffrey saw himself as pandering to a childish whim. He was going to get a surprise when he saw this child tonight.

She had judged Geoffrey's reaction correctly. It fairly set him back on his heels to see her looking so sleek and sophisticated. The dress itself was simple enough, what there was of it. It was made of fine black jersey, which draped well and made the most of Jenny's excellent figure. The top consisted of a V-necked halter, leaving her back entirely bare.

Geoffrey drew in a deep breath. "Jenny, you look . . . you look . . . beautiful!"

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"Good enough for Harcourt Manor?"

"They'll probably give you the place. Let's go!"

The evening was a success from the moment they left Wyntersfield. Geoffrey, a trifle bemused, was appreciative of the trouble she had taken over her appearance.

Jenny adored the manor house, but she admitted frankly that she needed help in dealing with the complicated menu, which endeared her to him still further. She accepted his advice over the food, and found it delicious when it came.

Only once did an anxious look cloud her face. She leaned forward and said in a low voice, "Geoffrey, is it really all right if I have lobster? It's fearfully expensive."

"Don't worry, Jenny. I have a penny or two to spare, and I'm enjoying myself. It's a long time since I gave a beautiful young woman a meal."

She looked at him wickedly over the top of her glass. "I know . . . don't tell me. You used to, but you gave it up!"

Geoffrey's smile slipped slightly. "Something of the sort," he admitted.

Over by the door, two newcomers paused for a word with the headwaiter, who greeted them as old acquaintances. "I have your table for you, the one you prefer," he said. "And, by the way, your son is here, Mr. Alderney."

"Geoffrey? That's unexpected. Where is he?"

"At the far end. You see? With the beautiful young lady in black."

Henry Alderney saw. "My word!" he said to his wife. "Do you see who it is?"

"Little Jenny Bertram," Mrs. Alderney replied slowly. Her eyes were fixed on her son's face, amused, absorbed. She turned to the waiter. "I'm sorry, Pierre, we shan't be dining here tonight after all. Will you forgive us?"

"Of course, madame."

"You've been badgering me for days to bring you here," Henry grumbled. "Why can't we stay? We need only to go and say hello to Geoffrey and Jenny. I'm not suggesting we should join them."

"My dear Henry, this is the first time I've seen Geoffrey looking even remotely human since I don't know when," said Alice. "I don't want to risk spoiling it by embarrassing him."

Totally unaware of the appearance and departure of his parents, Geoffrey continued to enjoy his evening. For the first time he realized that Jenny had literally no family at all.

"That was why I was so keen to keep the cottage," she explained. "I wanted somewhere where I belonged. You have forgiven me, haven't you?"

"Completely," Geoffrey assured her. He picked up his glass. "I quite forgot to give you this toast before—many happy returns, Jenny! Is this your twentieth birthday?"

"Well, no. I was anticipating a little bit when I said I was nineteen—but I am now."

"Adding on years is a sign of extreme youth, let me tell you."

"Yes, I know. But people don't take me seriously. Putting my hair up makes me look older."

"Every day of forty, but wonderfully well preserved."

"You see? All you do is laugh at me."

"I didn't laugh, did I?"

"You did underneath, and you're doing it now—your mouth is tucked in at the corners to stop you smiling."

Geoffrey gave in and laughed aloud. "You absurd child . . ."

"I am not a child! I want to be thought of as a woman."

"I do not," said Geoffrey drily, "find it at all difficult to think of you as a woman."

The smile on his lips had a faintly mocking edge to it now, but, meeting his eyes, Jenny received a severe jolt. My word, she thought, swiftly looking away, fire beneath the ice, still waters run deep, and all the other clichés; who would have thought it? She hurried into speech.

"I must say you are a most rewarding guest," Geoffrey commented later, when Jenny glowingly praised the dessert. More coffee?"

"No, thank you. Are you going to have some more?"

"No, not here. How about going home and having another cup there, and then I can have a brandy as well, which I won't risk here because of driving you home safely."

"Good idea. We could play one of your records. Unless you'd prefer to come in and have my coffee for a change?"

"Real coffee?"

"No—instant."

"We'll go to my house."

"Snob!"

"When is your birthday, Geoffrey?"

"Not until November. I hope I shan't have to wait that long before we spend another evening together. They have some very good concerts in Eastbourne, perhaps we could go to one or two?"

"That would be very nice."

"I'll get hold of the program."

Jenny found it surprising but nice to have the thought of concerts with Geoffrey to look foward to. She knew that he had enjoyed the evening as much as she had, but she had not really expected him to suggest any further excursions. She guessed, with a shrewdness which would have disconcerted Geoffrey, that any attraction she had for him was irksome to him.

They drew up outside the dark house. Geoffrey, apparently as cool as a cucumber, opened the door for her.

"Is Mrs. Wantage not back yet?" Jenny asked, carefully casual.

"No, I think she's gone to the cinema, in which case she won't be home much before midnight. Don't come through to the kitchen, Jenny. This is your night for being waited on. You go find the music you'd like to hear."

She went to look through his collection of records and chose Mozart.

"Very nice," Geoffrey agreed when he came back with the coffee. "Brandy?"

"Mm, yes, I think so, please," Jenny said doubtfully.

"Not your normal drink?"

"I don't very often get offered it, but as this is a special occasion, yes, I will have some."

It was a very civilized ending to the evening, she thought, curled up in the corner of the sofa, sipping her coffee and brandy, while Geoffrey lounged in his usual negligent fashion in the armchair by her side.

"I really ought to be going," Jenny said reluctantly when the piano concerto ended. "Geoffrey, you have been good to me this evening. I don't feel I've thanked you adequately."

"It was a very great pleasure," he said easily.

He went over to where she was sitting and bent over her, with the intention of bestowing the lightest of kisses on her pretty lips.

Unfortunately, Dr. Alderney, that man of stone, considerably overestimated his powers of self-control. Jenny, a trifle piqued by his would-be avuncular attitude, wound two bare arms round his neck and pressed her lips firmly to his, whereupon Geoffrey lost his head with cataclysmic thoroughness.

He was only dimly aware of her stifled protests, which he dealt with by closing her mouth with renewed kissing until he felt her stop resisting him; for a long moment she clung as closely as even he could wish. He bent his head and found the sweet hollow at the base of her throat, and heard her swift intake of breath, and then Jenny said uncertainly:

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"Geoffrey, I don't think we should . . . Geoffrey, please, stop!" But again he prevented her from speaking.

Finally, after a few more startling and breathtaking moments, Jenny succeeded in wrenching herself away from him and said with real sharpness, "Geoffrey, no!"

A degree of sanity began to filter through to him, and he sat up and looked at her, slow, difficult color rising in his cheeks.

"I think I'd better go," Jenny said.

"Yes." He held out a hand to her. "Jenny, I'm sorry. I behaved abominably. Please forgive me."

"I suppose I shall have to," she replied uncertainly. "It wasn't entirely your fault."

He put both his arms round her and held her gently. "Come on, Jenny—home!"

He escorted her to her door and waited while she unlocked it. Jenny paused for a moment and looked at him uncertainly. "Geoffrey, it was a lovely evening, and I'm still grateful to you, in spite of . . ."

"In spite of my having let the ravening beast out of its cage? Yes, well—let's leave it at that. Good night, Jenny."

Jenny went into her hallway and stopped to remove her shoes, which were pinching slightly. Deliberately, she threw first one and then the other at the kitchen door.

"Oh, to the devil with everything!" she said, and burst into tears.

When Jenny remembered that she had arranged to see Henry Alderney at midday, she was tempted to cancel the appointment.

It was stupid, of course, to feel a reluctance to face Mr. Alderney, just because one had had a somewhat searing encounter with his son. It was not as if he could possibly know, thought Jenny, inspecting herself in the looking-glass. She looked a little pale and heavy-eyed, but an invigorating ride into Bardenford would take care of that.

It did not entirely. Bob Prestow, alert for any likely symptoms, looked her over and announced, "You look a bit hung-over to me, Jenny love."

"I don't know any reason why I should be," Jenny returned coldly.

"Aw, come on! You were all lit up with excitement yesterday and you went out and bought a new dress. So, did you go to Harcourt Manor?"

"I don't know why I should tell you, but yes, I did," Jenny admitted.

"Well," Bob said, "I've only been there once, and that was with the Alderneys. Geoffrey went overboard about . . ."

He stopped and stared at his suddenly pink-faced secretary. "Not Geoffrey?" he demanded. "He never did!"

"I wish I was back in nice anonymous London," said Jenny fervently.

"Well, honestly . . . Geoffrey!"

"It happened to be my birthday."

"Jenny! Why didn't you tell me. I always buy my secretaries a drink on their birthdays. I suppose you wouldn't realize it, Jenny, but you must be the first girl Geoffrey has taken out since Angela died."

"Was Angela his fiancée?"

"That's right. She was killed in a car crash—it must be three years ago or thereabouts. Geoffrey's been in training for a Trappist monk ever since."

"I see," Jenny digested this. It explains a lot, she thought. "What was she like?"

"Angela? Very lively, full of energy. Always on the move. A sporting type, I suppose you'd say. She played marvelous tennis, swam like a fish, rode, played golf. You name it, Angela did it well."

"It doesn't sound much like Geoffrey, somehow."

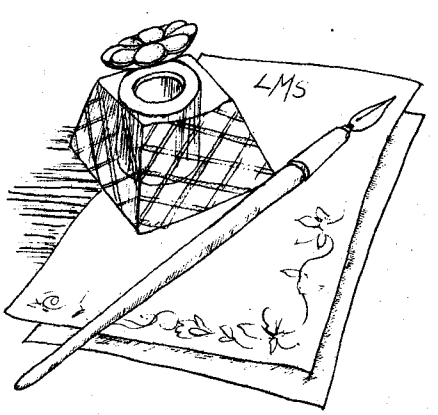
"No, but he was crazy about her. Of course, he was livelier himself in those days."

"Bob—you won't say anything to him, will you? About going out with me?"

"No. To tell you the truth, I wouldn't have pressed you if I'd realized it was Geoffrey."

"Because it meant absolutely nothing," said Jenny resolutely. "It was just an act of kindness because I accidently let it out that it was my birthday. I don't suppose it will ever happen again."

Unaccountably, her lips were quivering, and she bent her head over her notebook to hide this ridiculous weakness.



If Jenny had known that Henry Alderney had seen them at Harcourt Manor, she would have been even less inclined to meet him that lunchtime. But Henry was under strict orders from his wife not to bring up the subject.

"I know you," Alice Alderney told her husband when he mentioned that he was to see Jenny later in the day. "If you say anything at all, you'll say too much. Don't even mention Geoffrey, if you can avoid it. But give her a message from me. Tell her Copes got in the material she wants for her curtains, and if she gets it I'll help her make them."

Henry delivered the message to Jenny and added, "I'm going up to London for a legal dinner, and to visit some old friends, so Alice will be on her own. She suggests you do your shopping tomorrow morning and then go round to her for lunch—unless you have other plans?"

"No, that would suit me perfectly. I'd certainly be glad to have the use of Mrs. Alderney's sewing machine—not to mention her experience!"

"Well, bring your toothbrush. Then if you don't get finished, you can stay the night."

"Oh, I don't think it will take us that long! In any case, I don't know that I would care to leave the cottage empty overnight." She hesitated, marshaling her thoughts. "That's what I want to talk to you about."

Once again she recited the list of petty annoyances, but this time she added the disappearance of the silver toilet set.

"The china, too. When I came to think about it, I realized that that must have been removed very shortly before my first visit to the cottage; there were still clean rings among the dust in the cabinet."

"I have been very remiss," Henry Alderney said. "When we discovered the china was missing, and you accepted the loss, I decided to say nothing because I believed Albert Wynters must have disposed of it at some time. But if these things have disappeared since his death, then they must be regarded as having been stolen."

"I don't want to make any fuss about a few old cups and saucers," Jenny murmured unhappily.

"My dear, it was a complete service, more than a hundred years old. It was worth hundreds, possibly thousands of pounds. And the silver toilet set was eighteenth century. These were heirlooms, Jenny."

"Oh dear! I didn't even like it."

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Henry said reluctantly, "There must, of course, be one obvious suspect."

Jenny nodded. "I know."

"Mrs. Wantage had regular access. The keys were in her care."

"She doesn't like me," Jenny said slowly. "I don't know why, I thought it was for the same reason that Geoffrey was so down on me at first, but I can't believe it would drive her to steal."

Mr. Alderney shook his head. "I just don't understand. I suppose first we must talk to Geoffrey."

"Must we?"

"It's the obvious step. After all, she is his housekeeper and living in his house."

"Yes, I suppose so. I think I'd rather you told him, Mr. Alderney."

"As you wish," he agreed, slightly surprised.

"I must go," Jenny said, standing up.

"I'll talk to Geoffrey," said Mr. Alderney. "Then—depending on what he says—I think we should have a meeting to decide what is to be done next. It should be the police, of course . . ."

"No!"

"No, I thought you'd say that. Well, we'll see what can be done."

"How was Jenny?" his wife asked that evening.

"Miserable."

"Oh, dear!" Alice stared at her husband in dismay.

"She had things on her mind, which is why she came to see me. But there was more than that. If you ask me, Geoffrey made a mess of it last night."

"Perhaps you ought to talk to him."

"I am going to talk to him, but strictly on business. You don't seriously imagine a man of twenty-nine is going to take advice from his father on how to handle his women, do you?"

In view of her husband's report, Alice subjected Jenny to a close but unobstrusive scrutiny when she arrived with her curtain material the following day, but Jenny was giving nothing away.

Indeed, Alice might have been left with the impression that her husband had been exaggerating—if Geoffrey had not paid an unexpected call.

He walked into the house unceremoniously through the garden. Jenny, concentrating hard, was crawling round the floor cutting out material.

Alice looked up as he entered the room. "Geoffrey! How nice! Do be careful where you walk, won't you, dear?"

Geoffrey was brought to an abrupt halt, not so much by the material at his feet as by the wholly unexpected sight of Jenny.

She caught his eye and blushed deeply. She was wearing a white cotton turtleneck with long sleeves, but she had forgetfully pushed the sleeves up while she was working. The bruises she bore were very slight, and Alice Alderney would not have given them a second thought if her attention had not been caught by the way her son's eyes were riveted on them.

She took in his horrified expression and the hurried way Jenny pulled down her sleeves with a still more vivid blush, and her heart sank. She rushed into hurried speech.

"I'm very glad to see you, of course, dear, but we are terribly busy. Would you like to go into the garden? I'll get you some tea later."

Geoffrey dragged his eyes away from Jenny's kneeling figure. "I wasn't planning to stop," he said mechanically. "I wanted to check something with you, that's all. I didn't know Jenny would be here."

Jenny got up. "If you want to speak privately, I can go."

"No, it's not that. In fact, you should be the first to know, if what I suspect is true."

Geoffrey fished in the bag he was carrying and brought out a cup, saucer, and plate. "You know about china, don't you?" he asked his mother. "What can you tell me about these?"

"Not china, dear, porcelain. Very fine English porcelain; early nineteenth century. Lovely stuff."

"That's what I was afraid you'd say."

"But Jenny could have told you as much as I can. After all, it belongs to her."

"You mean you recognize it?"

"Yes, of course. It's part of the set that belonged to Miss Wynters."

"How can be sure?"

"My dear, it's unique. The flower decoration was copied from botanical drawings. Every piece is different. Let me see the plate—yes, that's the wild rose, one of my favorites. It lives in a china cabinet in Jenny's front room."

"It used to," said Geoffrey. "At the moment it's residing in a cupboard in my kitchen."

"Then it was true, what I suspected," Jenny said slowly.

"I'm afraid so. When Dad rang me last night and told me about the things that were missing from the cottage, I realized it might be more serious than I had thought, although it wasn't until after we had spoken that I remembered that cupboard full of china I couldn't account for. This leaves no doubt about Mrs. Wantage. She said the china was hers."

"But I don't want anything to happen to her," Jenny said earnestly.

"Well, we can consult Dad." He ran a harassed hand through his hair. "I shall have to dismiss her."

"Must you?"

"I'm afraid so. I can't employ someone I can't trust."

Jenny did not look particularly impressed by this, and Geoffrey went on. "I'll do the best I can for her. Anything short of keeping her on as my housekeeper." He turned to his mother. "When do you expect Dad back?"

"Tomorrow. You can come to lunch," his mother said. "In fact, I think it would be nice if you brought Jenny over just before eleven, and we can all go to church."

"I am not," said Geoffrey, emphatically, "going to church."

"Yes, you are, dear. It will do you good, and Jenny can meet people. Now that's settled, what about these curtains?"

"I'd better get out of your way," Geoffrey said.

"Don't hurry away. I've hardly seen you," his mother protested.

"You'll see me tomorrow."

"Yes, but if you stay and have some tea with us you can run Jenny home afterwards."

Geoffrey turned to Jenny. "Didn't you come on your motor bike?"

"I did, but I've been having a little trouble with the brakes, so I left it at the garage. I was planning to go home on the bus."

"And I had made up my mind that I was going to drive you home," Alice said. "But I must admit it will be more convenient if Geoffrey takes you."

Jenny would have preferred not

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being alone with Geoffrey. But since it could not be avoided, she determined that at least she would not let him down in front of his mother. Geoffrey was markedly silent the rest of the afternoon, nor did he find much to say during the short drive home.

When they arrived he got out and picked up the bulky parcel of curtains. "I'll carry this in for you," he said.

"There's no need, I can manage."

"It's quite heavy," Geoffrey said, firmly. Jenny made another attempt to take the curtains from him when she had unlocked her front door.

"I'll take them in. Where do you want them?" Geoffrey asked.

"In the front room," Jenny replied helplessly.

Geoffrey stared around him as he entered the room. "You've transformed the place!"

"It does look nice, doesn't it? And the curtains will be the finishing touch."

"Do you need any help in hanging them?"

"No, not yet. They're not quite finished."

There was an awkward pause and then Geoffrey said quietly, "Jenny, come here a minute."

Her hesitation was only momentary, and then she went to stand in front of him. He lifted first one arm and then the other and rolled back her sleeves. Jenny stood quietly and, when he had finished examining the damage he had inflicted, met his eyes steadily.

"I have rarely been more ashamed in all my life," Geoffrey said evenly.

"Let it go," Jenny replied. "I told you on Thursday night, I didn't altogether blame you."

"I blame myself. Jenny, there's a story I think I'd like to tell you."

"If it's about your fiancée being killed, I already know."

"There was more to it than the story that was made public."

"There's no need . . ."Jenny began, but he interrupted her.

"I want to tell you. Please, Jenny. There's never been anyone before you I could talk to—" He broke off and then went on in a tight voice, "You say there's no need, but there's my need . . . oh, confound it, I'm making a fool of myself. You're right, I'd better go."

"No!" Jenny said quickly. "No, please tell me." When he remained silent she added, "Bob told me that Angela was very beautiful, and that you were very much in love with her."

"Yes, that's true, or was at the time. She died just three weeks before we were due to be married. She was in a car with Miles Petrie . . ."

"Wanda's husband?"

"Yes, they died in the same accident. You hadn't heard that?"

"No."

"It didn't cause any gossip since there was no reason why they shouldn't have been together. She worked for him, and they were very friendly—more friendly than I had ever realized. In fact, at the time of the crash they were running away together."

"Geoffrey!" Jenny was unable to think of an adequate response, and he went on as if she had not spoken. "Nobody suspected. I would never have known, I suppose, except that Angela had written me a letter. She must have posted it the evening they left; I didn't get it until forty-eight hours after her death." He paused. "Her letter made the situation abundantly clear. It was a long-standing affair, going back to before our engagement, and it had gone on all the time we were . . . It was only the imminence of our marriage that had decided them to make a break for it."

"But why didn't she tell you?"

"Heaven knows! I would have been stunned, shocked, deeply hurt, but I would have let her go. What else could I have done?"

"And the man—Miles—how could he have let her get engaged to you?"

"I suspect it was a question of money. Miles, I think, would have been unwilling to leave Wanda for as long as he could . . ."

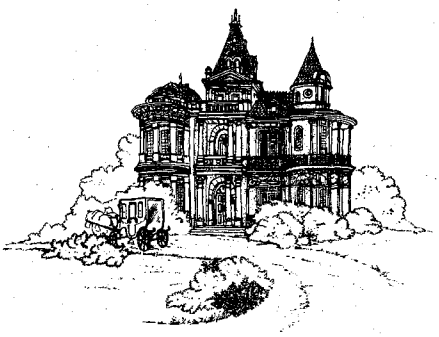
"You mean, he stayed with Wanda because she was rich?"

"Comparatively rich. Yes, I do think that."

"How horrible!"

"Miles lived an exceedingly expensive life," Geoffrey said drily.

"I wonder how it happened . . ."



"Again, I can only conjecture. But I have always hoped—since I have been able to think rationally about it at all—that Angela told him that once we were married she would be faithful to me."

"I think that could be what happened," Jenny said, eager for any palliative she could offer him. "Did Wanda know?"

"I believe not. Miles didn't write her a letter. I think I was supposed to be the one to break it to her—which, of course, I never did."

"No. Poor Geoffrey, what a cruel thing to have happened."

"I don't know if I can manage to make you understand the effect it had on me. The fact that I hadn't known . . ." He broke off, and there was a long silence. Then he went on in an expressionless voice, "I was perfectly happy, and I thought she was too."

Dimly, Jenny perceived something of the corroding disillusionment which had eaten into him. She blundered into a speech, desperately seeking to ease his long unhappiness. "You had no suspicion, at all?"

"No, none. There were occasional difficulties, even quarrels, but it seemed to me that they arose because Angela wanted more of my company, not less of it. She would get quite frantic, and it was one of the things I couldn't understand after I found out about Miles."

"If she was trying to fight against the attraction he had for her, and if she felt you were letting her down . . ."

"Yes." Again there was a long pause. "Poor Angela, perhaps I failed her."

"You're very ready to blame yourself. If she had had the sort of stability you had a right to expect . . ."

"If she had really loved me," Geoffrey said quietly. "I may not have understood her very well. But I did love her, Jenny."

"If you could bring yourself to pity her . . ."

"Instead of myself? I may yet come to it."

"I wish there was something I could say that would really help you," Jenny said.

"Talking to you has helped me a great deal."

"You should have talked it over with someone long ago."

"There wasn't anyone I cared to expose my emotions to. But actually, I've been hugging my self-pity to myself long enough. I've shut myself away." A sudden smile illuminated his face. "You appeal to me rather strongly, Jenny."

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Jenny fixed her eyes on a point at about the middle of his chest. "G-good!" she said, pink but determined.

Geoffrey laughed and, going to her, put both his arms round her and held her lightly. "Shall we make a fresh start?"

"Yes, please."

He would have let her go, but when he became aware of the soft, insistent pressure of her body, his arms tightened.

"Hey, give a man a chance to keep his good resolutions," he protested.

Jenny moved away from him, and Geoffrey draped a casual arm around her shoulders. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'd forgotten all about that. Geoffrey, we're not going to make a great thing about it, are we? I don't really care about the toilet set and the china, you know."

They wandered into the hall and paused there.

"That's why I want Dad's advice. We'll make as little fuss as possible, I promise you that."

"Come out through the kitchen and over the wall," Jenny suggested.

"All right."

Jenny moved away, a little ahead of him, and opened the kitchen door, then she hurriedly shut it again.

"The kitchen is hideously untidy," she said a little breathlessly. "I'm ashamed to have you to see it. I think I'll make you go out the front door after all."

"And I thought you were such a careful housewife." Geoffrey mocked her gently. "However, as you please, Jenny." He bent his head and pressed his lips to her forehead for a moment. "See you tomorrow," he repeated, and let himself out of the front door.

Jenny shut it and leaned against it, momentarily. Then she took a deep, steadying breath and started to think about this latest and quite unexpected development.

Like a small whirlwind, Jenny hurtled across the hall and flung open the kitchen door. Seated at the table, a cup of tea and a substantial sandwich in front of him, was Roy, the tiresome boyfriend of her ex-flatmate, Sandra.

He looked up as she came in. "Hello, darling," he said. "I've come to stay."

"How did you get in?" Jenny demanded.

"Easy. I saw an old biddy come out and put the key under a stone outside the front door. I guessed from that that you weren't in, so I waited until the coast was clear, then helped myself to the key and let myself in. OK?"

An old biddy? Mrs. Wantage! So that was how she had got into the cottage, Jenny thought. And I didn't even know the key was there!

"Where is the key now?" she asked.

Roy felt in the pocket of his tight jeans, fished it out and held it up.

"I'll take that, if you don't mind," Jenny said.

Teasingly, he held it out of her reach. "Say you're pleased to see me first," he said.

"I'm not pleased to see you." Jenny said. "And I'm very annoyed that you should have walked in like this. This is my house."

She made a snatch at the key, but Roy evaded her.

"Just a minute, just a minute," he said. "Let me explain, and you'll see why I have to keep the key. The thing is, I'm here for the weekend."

"Oh, no, you're not!"

"Case of have to, I'm afraid. The car flaked out on me just outside the village. I got it to a garage, but they can't promise it back before Monday. You'll just have to put me up till then."

"You can go to the village pub."

"Sure, if you'll pay. I can't afford repairs to the car and bed and breakfast at the pub."

"What are you doing in Wyntersfield, anyway?" Jenny asked.

"Came to see you, didn't I?"

"I'm sure I don't know why."

"Well, Sandra really made me mad last time we were down here. It struck me we might get along better, you and me, if she wasn't around."

"Does she know you're here?"

"I haven't told her, but I wouldn't be surprised if she put two and two together."

"And she'll blame me. A fine thing, considering I don't even like you! I'll let you stay, but just make one tiny move towards me and I'll scream blue murder and call the police."

Roy shrugged. "Please yourself," he said. "Of course, when I came down I didn't know you'd fixed yourself up with the doctor next door. Quite a talker, isn't he? I thought he'd never go."

"Did you listen?" Jenny asked sharply.

"Couldn't hear a word," Roy said carelessly. "Just his voice going on and on."

Jenny looked at him narrowly. She hoped he was telling the truth. It would be unbearable if Geoffrey's confidences had been overheard, especially by Roy. "You can have Albert's room, I suppose," she said, in a slightly more conciliatory tone.

"If that's the way you want it," Roy said.

"That's definitely the way I want it," Jenny said. "I'll feed you, but I'm going out to lunch tomorrow, so you'll be on your own most of the day."

"Oh, heck, what am I going to do with myself?"

"I've got plenty of jobs you can do," Jenny said. "If I'm to provide you with bed and board you can make yourself useful."

"Oh, Jenny this isn't the welcome I expected," Roy complained.

"It would have been, if you'd given the matter any thought at all. Apart from anything else, do you really expect me to make up to you behind Sandra's back? I'm really annoyed with you, Roy."

She was so earnest that even Roy's ego was deflated. Grudgingly, he performed one or two tasks for her, but went down to the Dog and Fox quite early in the evening, and Jenny was not sorry to be free of his company.

When he came back, Jenny showed him his room. He made a half-hearted grab at her, but she eluded him and went off to her own room. When she got there she looked thoughtfully at the door. There was no key, but there was a heavy old blanket chest along the wall. Jenny managed to push it across the door, then she undressed and got into bed. Her light had only been out a few minutes when she heard the door handle turn. There was a loud thump as the door hit the heavy chest, and a muffled curse from Roy as he stubbed his toe. Jenny grinned to herself, turned over and went to sleep.

Geoffrey found it difficult to treat Mrs. Wantage naturally when he got back to his house, and he was not sorry to be able to tell her that he would be out most of the next day.

He made his escape fairly early on

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Sunday morning, reluctantly acknowledging an urgent desire to see Jenny again as soon as possible. He stepped over the low garden wall, and was brought up short by the sight of Roy sitting at the kitchen table, very much at his ease. He looked up as Geoffrey appeared in the doorway.

"Morning, squire," Roy said. "Come on in. Jenny's gone chasing the milkman for an extra pint, but she'll be back in a minute."

"What are you doing here?" Geoffrey asked, advancing slowly into the kitchen.

"I thought a bit of country air would be good for my health," Roy said. He tilted back on his chair and grinned impudently.

"Did Jenny know you were coming?"

"Can't say she did."

"Well, you're out of luck. She's going to be out most of the day."

"So she told me." Roy shrugged. "The luck of the draw," he said. "Make hay while the sun shines, squire. I'll be waiting for her when you get back."

"Has Jenny said you can stay?"

"Couldn't really do anything else, could she?"

The front door banged and Jenny came in, carrying a bottle of milk. "Caught him!" she said triumphantly. She stopped when she realized Geoffrey was in the room, and blushed vividly. "Oh . . . you've met," she said.

"Yes," said Geoffrey, without noticeable pleasure. "I came round to see if you were ready to leave. Obviously, you are not."

He looked pointedly at her shabby jeans, sandals, and untidy hair.

"It's still early," Jenny said defensively. "It will only take me a minute to change, honestly. Roy, I shall leave you to do the washing up. There's some cold boiled bacon in the refrigerator you can have for your lunch, and ask Mick Cross for some tomatoes and a lettuce. I'll be back" — she glanced uncertainly at Geoffrey — "I suppose some time this afternoon."

"I'll be here," Roy promised.

Geoffrey turned away. "I'll get the car out," he said. "Come round when you're ready."

Barely twenty minutes later Jenny appeared at Geoffrey's front gate in a long mauve cotton skirt sprigged with little white flowers, and a demure white blouse, high-necked, long-sleeved, and trimmed with narrow lace. She was carrying a wide-brimmed straw hat trimmed with flowers, which she perched on her head, looking at Geoffrey from under its shady brim.

Geoffrey felt his cloud of ill-humor disappearing in the light of Jenny's charm. "May I have the honor of driving you to church in my horseless carriage, Miss Bertram?"

"Thank you, Dr. Alderney," Jenny said demurely. She settled herself in the car, thinking with relief that after all Geoffrey was not going to be difficult about finding Roy in the cottage that morning. She decided to bring the subject out into the open and explain the situation.

"I expect you were surprised to find Roy there?" she asked tentatively.

"I was," Geoffrey admitted. "He must have started out quite early to have got down to you before ten o'clock. He must feel a little put out at your going off and leaving him like this."

"He came yesterday," Jenny said in a subdued voice.

The car swerved slightly. "He stayed the night with you?" Geoffrey asked.

"His car broke down," Jenny explained. "Naturally I had to let him stay. What else could I do?"

Dismayed by his grim silence, Jenny allowed herself to be betrayed into unwise speech.

"Geoffrey, Roy said he saw Mrs. Wantage come out of my cottage and hide a spare key under that white stone by the front door. That was how he got in."

"Do you mean to say he had the gall to take the key and let himself in?"

"Yes."

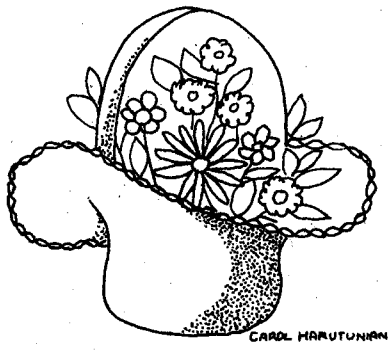
"But surely . . . you can't mean he was already there when we arrived back yesterday?"

"I'm afraid he was."

"But where was he? Why didn't he come out and speak to you?"

"He was in the kitchen. He heard our voices and thought it would be more tactful to wait until you had gone."

"Nice of him," Geoffrey said. "I would not have suspected him of so much fine feeling."



"Geoffrey, he didn't hear what we were talking about," Jenny said. "Truly, I don't think he heard anything."

"Even if he didn't, the thought that he was there . . ." Another thought occurred to him. "You went into the kitchen," he said. "You opened the door and then you shut it again in a hurry and said I'd better go out the front door. Because the kitchen was untidy, you said. Was it Roy who was cluttering the place up?"

"Yes. I thought . . . I didn't mean you to know he was there," Jenny admitted.

"You wanted to spare my feelings, Well, you have the reputation of being a kind girl, haven't you? My own fault, of course. I should have known better than to bare my soul in public. It never pays. I told you that once before and you didn't agree with me. Now perhaps you'll believe it's true."

But during the church service a certain peace descended on Geoffrey, and, with it, a feeling of shame at the way he had vented his hurt on Jenny. When the final hymn was reached, and Jenny, for the first time, lifted up her pure sweet, soprano voice to join in the singing, Geoffrey listened for the first verse, then joined in with his own pleasant tenor. Jenny turned her head and gave him a smile of unalloyed pleasure, and he smiled back at her.

The conference with Henry Alderney produced no easy solution to the problem of Mrs. Wantage. To Jenny's regret, he suported Geoffrey's decision to dismiss her.

"I feel sorry for her," Jenny explained. "And I keep telling you I don't really care about the things she's taken."

"Don't forget the other incidents," Geoffrey reminded her. "They worry me more than the thefts, though I'm inclined to agree with your idea that she might have been trying to drive you away because of her sense of guilt at having taken your possessions."

"So if I tell her I know what she's done and offer to give the things to her, then she won't feel guilty, and everything will be all right," Jenny pointed out triumphantly.

"I can't give you any reason why it should be so," Geoffrey said slowly. "But I think she might resent your generosity, Jenny."

"I think we should have a meeting with her," Henry Alderney said.

"One evening next week?" Geoffrey suggested.

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"Just a minute," Jenny intervened. "We must think about this a bit more. What is going to happen to her afterwards? Where can she go?"

Mr. Alderney turned to his wife. "Has she any family?"

"Not that I know of," Mrs. Alderney admitted.

There was a brief, unhappy silence, and then Geoffrey said, "Jenny's right; we can't leave her homeless."

Then Alice had an idea. "Henry's on the board of trustees of some local almshouses—old cottages, but very nicely modernized inside. If we could get Mrs. Wantage into one of those it would be an ideal solution."

"I'd have to inquire whether there are any vacancies. Certainly nothing must be said to Mrs.Wantage until I have something definite to offer her." He looked at his son apologetically. "I realize your dilemma, but can you keep her on until I've investigated?"

It was a solution that satisfied them all. The rest of the time seemed to pass in a flash, until suddenly Jenny remembered her unwelcome visitor.

As she had anticipated, Roy was thoroughly bored by the time she returned.

"I don't know how you can stand it here all on your own," he said.

"I like it," Jenny said firmly. "Have you done any work for me?"

"Not much. I cut the grass. You staying in this evening?"

"Yes. And I'll get you a decent meal to make up for giving you cold bacon for lunch."

He lounged around the kitchen, getting in her way while she prepared their meal. It was an additional irritation when the doorbell rang. She went to answer it, and there on the doorstep was Sandra.

"Is Roy here?" she demanded.

"Yes," said Jenny, standing aside as Sandra swept into the house.

"I knew he would be! It's taken me hours to get here. I suppose he's been here the whole weekend."

"His car broke down," Jenny said.

"I bet it did! Very convenient! Where is he?"

"In the kitchen."

She made no attempt to restrain Sandra as she burst into the kitchen and confronted Roy.

Their quarrel smoldered and flared for the rest of the evening. Roy did have the grace to admit that he had descended on Jenny uninvited. Once Sandra was able to persuade herself that his visit had been a sudden impulse and had only prolonged itself by accident, she began to subside. Jenny seized on the lull to suggest that she might feel better after some food.

The quarrel might have blown over completely if Roy had not chosen to lavish praise on Jenny's cooking and to make pointed comparisons between her and some other girls he knew.

By the time Jenny had eaten her cheese, the row was raging once more, until finally even Roy lost his patience. He pushed back his chair so violently that it crashed to the floor behind him.

"I've had enough!" he said. "I'm going to bed!"

He flung out of the room, while Sandra collapsed in floods of tears.

"He'll never forgive me! Oh,Jenny, Jenny, what am I going to do?"

"Why don't you wash your hands of him?" Jenny suggested. "I never have understood what you could see in him."

"I love him!"

"I don't see how you can." There was a pause. "Perhaps you'll both see things differently in the morning," Jenny went on hopefully. "I'll make you up a bed on the settee, and you'll feel better after a good night's sleep."

"But I must make it up with him first."

"Up the stairs, first door on the right," Jenny said briskly.

"Suppose he won't let me in?"

"Well, he can't lock you out, there's no key. No blanket chest either," she added thoughtfully.

She busied herself after Sandra had gone upstairs with making up a bed for her. It did not look particularly comfortable, but it was the best she could do. The kitten, at least, appreciated it.

"I didn't go to all this trouble for you, Sam, my lad," Jenny told him. "You will sleep in the kitchen, as usual." She picked him up and put him against her shoulder. "But you can bite her toes as much as you like," she promised in a whisper.

Next door, Geoffrey wandered out into the garden for a breath of air before he turned in. Casually, he glanced towards Berry Cottage. The kitchen was dark; Jenny had switched off the light before going to make up Sandra's bed. There was a light in Roy's room, not a strong light, but enough to show the silhouettes of two figures in the room.

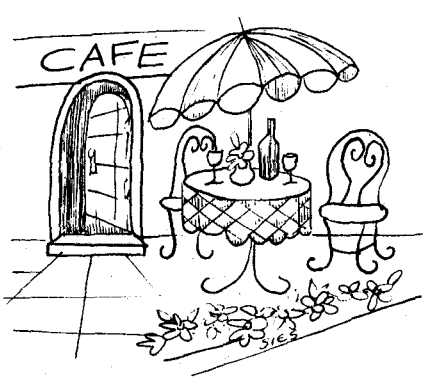
Geoffrey looked away. He was not going to descend to spying! He bent and sniffed at a rose. But a moth brushed against his cheek, and as he waved it away, he glanced once again at the lit window. The tall, slim figure of the girl approached that of the boy. She wound her arms round his neck, but he put up his hands and freed himself, pushing her away from him. She went to him again and seemed to be pleading with him. Again she put her arms round his neck, and this time he took her in his arms and pulled her close. Her long hair streamed down her back.

Geoffrey stood rooted to the spot, unable to drag his eyes away. The couple moved away from the window, out of his line of vision.

She said she didn't like him, Geoffrey thought numbly. She said she wouldn't touch him with a barge pole. But I saw it, I didn't imagine it. She was throwing herself at his head! Jenny? No, not Jenny! She wouldn't . . . she couldn't . . .

Unbidden, the recollection of that slim figure with the long hair came back. She had lied to him yesterday, he remembered; she had tried to conceal Roy's presence in her cottage. And she had been very anxious to get back to him today.

He walked back into the house, scarcely aware of what he was doing. Nothing was real except the blank, hurt astonishment inside him.



The next morning, Sandra came wandering into the kitchen just as Jenny was finishing her breakfast.

"Any tea?" Sandra asked.

"No, I had instant coffee," Jenny said. "But I'll put the kettle on for you. Everything all right?"

"Fabulous!" Sandra sighed ecstatically.

"Good," said Jenny absently. "I must fly. I'll say goodbye now. Have a good journey back to London."

"Oh, thanks. And thanks for putting us up, and everything."

"Not at all," said Jenny politely. She went off to work, not sorry to have

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avoided seeing Roy.

At lunchtime she went to collect her motorcycle, but learned to her dismay that it wouldn't be ready before Wednesday.

"Some spare part they have to get," she complained to Bob, back at the office. "It is a nuisance."

"Hard luck. I tell you what, I've got an appointment out your way this evening. I'll run you home first, if you like."

"Oh, Bob, will you? You are kind."

He drove her home as promised, and when they arrived he looked at his watch. "I have nearly half an hour to spare," he said. "Can I come in and see what you've been doing with the cottage?"

"Yes, of course."

"You've done marvels!" Bob exclaimed after he looked round. "I really take my hat off to you, Jenny. Clever girl! Are these new curtains?"

"Yes, Mrs. Alderney helped me to make them."

"Did she?" Bob murmured, but refrained from any further comment.

"Would you like some home-made lemonade? We can take it out into the garden."

"Good idea."

They wandered out, their glasses in their hands, and in default of any other seat, perched themselves on the wall adjoining Geoffrey's garden. It would be nice if Geoffrey could join them, Jenny thought, but this was a busy time of day for him.

Actually, Geoffrey had spent a miserable day, never losing the sense of a dull, lurking pain that was waiting at the back of his consciousness, ready to pounce as soon as he lowered his guard. But, in spite of the evidence of his eyes, he had begun to think there might just possibly be some explanation of her strange conduct not apparent to him. He could not help remembering her transparent honesty, and the way she had told him of her own accord that Roy had arrived on Saturday, not Sunday, as he thought at first.

I'll have it out with her, he thought. She's right, I do bottle things up too much.

He finished up with his patient, and then went over to the window to wash his hands.

Out in the garden, Jenny and Bob were still sitting on the wall. Suddenly Jenny gave an exclamation and put up a hand to her face.

"Something wrong?" Bob asked.

"A fly in my eye, I think. Oh, Bob, quick, can you see it?"

"Hold still. Yes, I can. Just a minute."

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket, while Jenny screwed up her face in distress. He put his hand under her chin and held her face up to the light. Very delicately, he removed the tiny insect.

"There!"

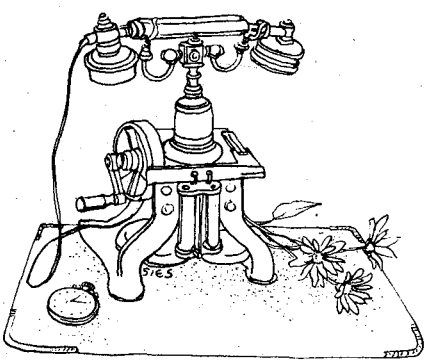
"Is that all it was? Thank you, Bob."

He was still standing with his hand cupped round her cheek and she smiled up at him. Swiftly, he bent down and kissed her soundly on the lips.

Jenny drew back, surprised but not annoyed, and still smiling. "Really, Bob!" she protested. "I've half a mind to do something old-fashioned, like smacking your face."

"It was irresistible, I assure you," he said cheerfully.

"Well, don't do it again, or you'll



have to find yourself another secretary."

"Now that's a serious threat! There are plenty of women in the world, but good secretaries are scarce!"

Jenny laughed. "You'd better go," she said. "What about that appointment?"

"You see? The perfect secretary. Yes, I must be off. See you tomorrow, Jenny."

"I'll see you out," she said and they went back into the cottage.

Geoffrey had caught only the second half of this little drama. So much for the more charitable thoughts he had been harboring towards Miss Jenny Bertram! My own best friend, he thought numbly. Kissing Bob in the back garden, where anyone could have seen her. Broad daylight. And laughing about it. He dried his hands with savage thoroughness.

Jenny was a little surprised to see nothing of Geoffrey on Monday night, considering the way he had pleaded for a few minutes of her time on Sunday. Bob ran her hime again on Tuesday and tentatively inquired whether she would like to go the cinema with him later in the week. Jenny hesitated, and then accepted. "Any night except Thursday," she said.

"Because Thursday is Geoffrey's free evening?" Bob asked gently.

"Yes," said Jenny, blushing vividly at the admission.

"I see. And have you, in fact, got a date with him then?"

"No."

"But you're prepared to keep the evening free in case he wants your company?"

"Yes."

Bob made a slight grimace. "Well, that tells me where I stand! Oh, well, we'll go to the pictures on Friday, shall we? On a strictly platonic basis."

They had been standing outside Jenny's cottage, Bob leaning against his car, Jenny with one hand on her gate. As they finished talking, Geoffrey's car pulled up and he got out, late for his surgery. There was a fractional pause when he saw Jenny and Bob, then he gave them a curt nod.

Bob was already getting back into his own car, but he waved to Geoffrey before he shut the door. Geoffrey watched him drive away, then he turned to Jenny.

"The same man two nights running?" he asked with raised eyebrows. "You're slipping a bit, aren't you?"

He strode away while Jenny stood gasping, shocked not so much by his words as by the manner in which they had been uttered, and by the icy contempt in his eyes as they rested on her.

Mrs. Alderney ran into Wanda Petrie at the hairdresser's on Thursday morning.

"Oh, Wanda," Alice exclaimed. "How nice you look."

"Thank you, Alice."

"How are you?" Alice asked conscientiously. "I haven't seen you for an age."

"No. I haven't seen you *or* Geoffrey. Since our little scheme for the dispensary fell through, he seems to have dropped me."

"He's very busy," Alice murmured by way of an excuse.

"No doubt. I must look in on him some time when I am in Wyntersfield."

She wandered away to have coffee in a nearby restaurant. It really was too bad of Geoffrey to have neglected her so blatantly. It would not be a bad idea to bring herself back to his notice.

Geoffrey was not conspicuously pleased to see her when he opened the

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door to her that evening, but any interruption of his thoughts was welcome, so he suggested she stay for dinner.

"Are you sure there will be enough?" Wanda asked sweetly.

"Oh, yes. A simple meal, but adequate."

"Simple indeed! You could do better than this, Geoffrey."

"I don't see how. I'm all right."

"You don't look it. In fact, you don't look at all well."

"I seem to have collected a slight cold from somewhere."

"You don't take sufficient care of yourself."

"Nonsense!" said Geoffrey. "Come along. I'll open a bottle of wine."

The evening passed off reasonably well. Wanda managed to hold Geoffrey's attention with talk about the hospital.

She did not stay late, and he was not sorry to see her go. His head was beginning to throb, and his cold seemed to be getting worse. He walked her to her car.

"It's been delightful," Wanda said, with more graciousness than truth, since she would far rather have had a civilized meal in a restaurant. "Thank you so much, Geoffrey."

"Not at all," he murmured mechanically. It occurred to him that Wanda had a faintly expectant air about her, standing there in the dim evening light. Well, why not? What was sauce for the goose was very definitely sauce for the gander.

He moved forward, took Wanda in his arms and kissed her. As he drew away, Geoffrey knew he had made a profound mistake. Vanilla ice cream, he thought. Cold and sickly sweet. Not a bit like . . .

Wanda was smiling with gratification. "I really must go," she murmured, as if Geoffrey were trying to detain her. "I'll see you for golf on Sunday then, shall I?"

"Perhaps," said Geoffrey, backing away. "Good night, Wanda."

He would have let the golf idea drop, but his partner took it up with him on Saturday. "Wanda tells me you're playing golf with us," George Fellowes said.

"I did say something about it," Geoffrey admitted.

"Good idea. Get you out of the house for a change. That's a stinking cold you've got. A breath of fresh air might blow it away. I'll see you about ten tomorrow at the Club House."

But the next morning Wanda telephoned, very cross, to say that she seemed to have caught his cold and did not think it wise to go out, particularly since it looked like rain. Geoffrey realized that if he deserted, too, George would be left without a partner. Anyway, who cared about a little drop of rain?

When they were caught in a sudden squall way out on the tenth hole, he began to change his mind. Cold, wet, and playing badly, he trudged in George Fellowes's wake. What a way to spend a Sunday morning!

Afterwards, he drove home, toyed with his lunch, then sat down in his armchair and fell asleep. He woke a couple of hours later, heavy-headed and with a searing pain in his chest. Tomorrow, if he felt no better, he would get a prescription made up.

When the doorbell rang, he let Mrs. Wantage answer it. She came in to him and said, "It's that Miss Bertram." He went to the door, his face implacable.

"May I come in?" she asked tentatively.

"I don't think it would be wise. I have a terrible cold," he said.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Did you want anything in particular?"

"I wanted to know whether there was any news from your father. You know, about . . . about the cottages," Jenny stammered. It was only half true. Far more she wanted to see Geoffrey, to get to the bottom, if she could, of his extraordinary behavior.

"There's a meeting of the trustees of the almshouses on Friday," Geoffrey said. "We can't really do anything until then."

Perhaps if he had not been feeling so unwell, he might have responded to the mute appeal in her eyes. As it was, he waited in stony silence until she turned and left. Jenny was infuriated. How dared he treat her like this?

And it didn't help matters when she ran into Mick Cross, who mentioned having seen Geoffrey with Wanda.

"I thought we'd get rid of her when you moved in," Mick grumbled. "But she seems to be creeping back again. My life won't be worth living if the doctor takes it into his head to marry her. It's enough to make me think of giving up work!"

"Marry Wanda?" said Jenny, blankly.

"He was kissing and cuddling her at the front gate on Thursday night," Mick said gloomily. "It looks bad for me."

Jenny put her chin in the air. "They are very old friends," she said. "What could be more natural?"

Indignation struggled with the hurt she felt. Geoffrey had behaved abominably toward her, and what exactly had he meant by that crack about the same man two nights running? She had an uneasy feeling he might have seen the casual kiss Bob gave her, which she could have explained, given the chance. Geoffrey Alderney, thought Jenny, had a vastly inflated idea of his own importance!

Wanda was not feeling kindly disposed towards Geoffrey, either. She waited in vain for an inquiry about her health, and in the end called Geoffrey herself. "Really, darling," she said. "You might have had the decency to ask how I was. After all, you gave me this beastly cold."

"I'm sorry,' Geoffrey said feebly.

"I expect to be better by Thursday," Wanda went on. "Shall I come to you, or would you like to come and have a decent dinner in Bardenford?"

"It's difficult for me to get away this week," Geoffrey said, rattled by her assumption that they would spend his free evening together. "George is away at a meeting."

"Then I'll come to you," Wanda said.

I wonder what would happen if I said no, Geoffrey thought, but he could not bring himself to do it. The telephone rang again and he looked at it with loathing. All he needed was some dire emergency; but it was Roy ringing from London to ask if he would give a message to Jenny.

"I beg your pardon?" Geoffrey said.

"I said, would you ask Jenny to phone me," Roy repeated with cheerful insouciance. "Rather urgent, or I wouldn't bother you. Just ask her to give me a ring. OK?"

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to hold on while I go fetch her?" Geoffrey asked with heavy sarcasm.

"No, thanks, too expensive. Just give her the message."

He rang off, leaving Geoffrey in a blazing temper. Before it could cool he stalked round to Berry Cottage and

THAT SPECIAL ART

By May Richstohe

Cease and desist, O rebellious heart
From assailing the unassailable
And cultivate that special art
Of joying in what is available.

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delivered Roy's message in a manner which left Jenny in no doubt about his feelings.

"I'm sorry you should have been bothered," she said stiffly.

"Not at all," said Geoffrey with terrible politeness. "Perhaps you would like to come in and return the call? Don't hesitate to make use of my house, my telephone or anything else of mine for which you may find a temporary use!"

"Nothing would induce me to set foot in your house again," said Jenny, in an equally fine temper. "I don't know what I've done to make you so hideously rude to me, and I don't care. You're rude, arrogant, self-centered—everything I most dislike in a man. I don't know what I ever saw in you, but whatever it was it's over now. Good night, Dr. Alderney—and I wish I could make it goodbye!"

She slammed the door shut, and Geoffrey could only stand looking at it in blank surprise.

The effect of this exchange was to make Geoffrey perversely determined to be far more welcoming to Wanda, and it drove Jenny into accepting another invitation from Bob Prestow.

Bob accepted Jenny's friendship with cheerful resignation, but Wanda had a very different idea of her importance in Geoffrey's life. On Thursday evening she took it upon herself to rearrange his affairs.

"Surely you could make yourself more comfortable?" said Wanda. "This house needs decorating, and some new furniture would be an improvement."

"I'm comfortable enough," said Geoffrey.

"You've lowered your standards to a ridiculous extent. It's time you replaced Mrs. Wantage."

"I might possibly do that," Geoffrey admitted.

"So I should hope. You could do better, Geoffrey."

"Perhaps I could."

There was a short pause and then Wanda said, carefully casual. "What you really need is a wife."

Geoffrey's lips twisted in a wry smile. "Who would have me?" he asked idly.

"I would," said Wanda.

The wine in the glass Geoffrey was holding jumped so violently that a few drops leapt out of the glass onto the tablecloth. "My dear Wanda," he said, in a welter of embarrassment, "I hadn't thought . . . I'm sure you wouldn't really dream of taking on an unsatisfactory chap like me."

"I realize it is a new idea to you," Wanda said calmly. "But I think you should give it some thought. We have been drawn together over the last few years—your sympathy has been the greatest support to me, as I hope mine has to you. We have interests in common, and we are neither of us ever likely to make the mistake of falling in love again . . ."

"Not even with each other?" Geoffrey could not resist asking.

"I think not," said Wanda. "On the contrary, we could manage to live an adequate life together. Where there is liking and respect, two mature people can surely make a tolerable marriage."

"Perhaps," said Geoffrey. "But I've been leading a tolerable life for the last couple of years. I'm not sure I want it to continue."

"Nonsense! You've been moping after Angela. It's high time you got over that. There's something I think you ought to know about her, Geoffrey. Perhaps it would help you to understand my own attitude. Your Angela was having an affair with my husband."

Geoffrey looked at her in horror. "You knew?" he asked.

"Of course I knew. I had lived with the knowledge of Miles's infidelity for years."

"Years?" said Geoffrey.

"Oh, there were others before Angela! You can see why I don't feel that kind of attraction is necessary for a successful marriage."

Geoffrey drew a deep breath. "Yes, I can see your point of view," he admitted. "I can even agree with you that it might be possible for two people who have suffered the sort of disillusionment and bereavement we have to make a life together, but it would have to be two quite different people. Not us—or at any rate, not me."

"I hope you don't want me to pretend to have fallen in love with you," Wanda said. "What I have in mind is a partnership, more of a business relationship, really, otherwise I suppose I would hardly have ventured to suggest it to you."

Well, thank heavens for that, at any rate, Geoffrey thought wildly.

"I appreciate your motives," he said carefully. "But the whole idea is based on a misunderstanding of my character. I have an emotional nature which I am at some pains to keep under control because I cannot afford to let it overrule my intellect. I am afraid the kind of relationship you suggest would be quite impossible for me."

With a bitter pang of regret, Wanda abandoned a cherished dream. She had seen herself so clearly as the soignee wife of a doctor, efficiently running his well-appointed house, helping him in his social life. The fact that Geoffrey himself was a somewhat shadowy figure in this fantasy had escaped her notice, and continued to escape it. She still believed that she could have shaped him to her mold if he had not suddenly changed over the last few weeks.

"I suppose it's that Bertram girl," she said.

For once Geoffrey exercised the self-control of which he had been boasting. "Not at all," he said, "I have little interest in Jenny Bertram, and she has none in me. My only reason for declining to discuss your idea is that I am convinced we should not suit."

Wanda shrugged. "Very well. I'm disappointed in you, Geoffrey."

"You always would have been, my dear," he said quietly. "You've had a lucky escape."

NEW DREAMS FOR OLD

By Otta Louise Chase

Capriciously I fall in love with love:
Again and yet again I yearn in vain.
Now you appear . . . no courtly armored knight . . .
No pleading cavalier on bended knee:
All preconceived imaginings take flight.
Another music lends reality
To this more modern dance and I am quite
Content that you are you and I am me.

The confrontation with Mrs. Wantage would have been difficult in any circumstances. With two of the participants barely on speaking terms, it required all Henry Alderney's professional tact to get the interested parties into the same room together. Jenny, contacted by telephone at the office on Friday, showed a marked reluctance to be present.

At his request, the task of taxing Mrs. Wantage with her misdemeanors was left to Henry Alderney, who was not altogether surprised when she admitted her offenses with defiant bravado.

"I never took anything that wasn't owed to me," she said.

"Owed to you?" Jenny asked. "Did Great-Aunt Henrietta owe you money?"

"Not her! She wouldn't have been beholden to me! No, it was Albert."

"Have you any proof of this debt?"

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Henry Alderney put in.

"I've got the notes he gave me."

When Mrs. Wantage produced a piece of paper, he was forced to admit that Albert Wynters had, indeed, borrowed money from her.

"You should have told me," Jenny said gently. "I would have tried to repay you—somehow."

"It wasn't just the money," Mrs. Wantage said. "He promised that cottage to me. I haven't had my rights, no matter what the law may say."

"But Albert couldn't do that," Mr. Alderney put in. "He had no more than a life interest in it."

"That was her doing," Mrs. Wantage said bitterly. "She must have got wind of what he intended, and she tied it up so nothing could come to me." She looked at Mr. Alderney with deep loathing. "You all hang together, you lot. I went and saw a lawyer as soon as Albert died, and he said the same as you."

Henry felt in his breast pocket and took out his checkbook. "As Miss Bertram's lawyer, I shall pay you in full for those IOUs Albert Wynters signed," he said. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a small movement of protest from Jenny. He turned his head and looked at her. "We will discuss the question of repayment another time," he said firmly. He turned back to Mrs. Wantage and went on: "In return, you will hand over the IOUs and give Miss Bertram her property."

"I would like to make Mrs. Wantage a present of the toilet set," Jenny put in, determined. Let poor Mrs. Wantage, who had been so shamefully treated by Albert, have at least one of the things she really coveted.

"That's very generous of you," Henry said. He wrote a check and handed it over. Silently, Mrs. Wantage passed him the rest of the papers.

He glanced through them until he came to the bottom sheet. "What's this?" he asked. "Oh, I see, the answer you had from your solicitors about your claim to the cottage."

"May I see the letter?" Jenny asked Mrs. Wantage. "I'd be a lot happier if I knew your solicitors had gone into the question properly, and given the same opinion."

Mrs. Wantage shrugged. "Why not?" she said.

It was not until Jenny reached the last paragraph that she looked up with a puzzled frown. "I don't understand this," she said. "It says that 'even if your relationship could be proved' it would make no difference. What relationship, Mrs. Wantage?"

Mrs. Wantage stood up and snatched the letter out of her hand. "I'd forgotten that was there," she muttered.

It was Geoffrey who produced the solution. "I think I know," he said quietly. "Albert Wynters was your brother, wasn't he, Mrs. Wantage?"

"Brother!" Jenny exclaimed in astonishment. "You mean . . ."

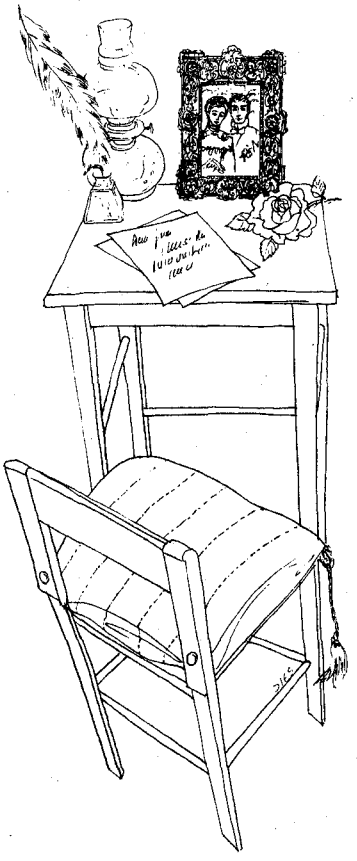
"I mean that Dick Geary, who was once a gardener at the Hall, was the father of Henrietta Wynters's child. Am I right, Mrs. Wantage?"

Mrs. Wantage was silent for a long moment, then she nodded. "They're all dead now," she said. "So I suppose there's no harm in speaking out, though I don't want it to go any further."

Henry Alderney cleared his throat. "Well, Mrs. Wantage, you have been extremely foolish. Indeed, you have acted very wrongly, particularly in your attempts to drive Miss Bertram away, and I think she is treating you very generously. As to the future . . ." He glanced at Geoffrey, who did not appear to recognize his cue, so he went on, "I think it is time for you to retire."

"And where am I to go, may I ask?"

"I was coming to that. I can offer you a place in one of the Haddon Trust cottages."



"One of the almshouses! No, thank you!"

"The cottages have been nicely modernized, and are extremely comfortable," Mr. Alderney began, but Mrs. Wantage would not listen. "I'm not going into the poor house, and that's flat," she said. She stood up and swept out of the room in a flurry of indignation, slamming the door behind her.

Henry sighed. "I'd better go after her," he said. "Perhaps I can make her see reason."

"I'm stunned," Jenny said as soon as he had left the room.

"Let's try to put it together," Geoffrey said.

"Mrs. Wantage's father, Dick Geary, was a gardener at the big house when the Wynterses still owned it," Jenny told him.

"He seduced the daughter of the house."

"And either she never told her parents who was responsible, or else they regarded him as too humble for her to marry. Anyway, she was sent away to have her baby—who was Albert—and came back when he was about two years old. She bought Berry Cottage with money that was left to her by her grandmother."

"It must have taken a lot of courage in those days."

"Yes, I suppose so." Jenny was thinking deeply. "Do you know, I bet she intended to marry Dick Geary when he came back from the war. She'd refused to be parted from the baby. I think she settled here because she expected him to come back, and then she would have defied everyone and married him."

"Only Dick Geary got up to his tricks again in Belgium, and this time the girl had a father who made him marry her."

Jenny shivered. "Henrietta never forgave him," she said. "I can feel she didn't. She stayed here all her life out of pride and stubbornness, and brought up Albert in ignorance of who his father was. Oh dear, I wish I knew what to do. It makes me feel quite differently about Berry Cottage."

"Mrs. Wantage never had the shadow of a claim to it," Geoffrey assured her.

"I wish I could feel confident of that."

"The money to buy Berry Cottage came originally from Henrietta's family," Geoffrey pointed out. "It had nothing to do with Dick Geary or his daughter."

"No, I suppose not," Jenny agreed.

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"But I have a horrible feeling that I shall always feel guilty now about living in Berry Cottage."

At that moment Mr. Alderney came back into the room, saying with a worried frown, "She really is a most unreasonable woman. I'm not sure even now I have succeeded in convincing her that the Trust cottage is her best bet."

Jenny said, "I'm most grateful to you for all your help, Mr. Alderney. I'm going to London for the weekend, so perhaps you will let me know next week what is going to happen. I'm very worried about Mrs. Wantage. I don't think my family has treated her at all well, and I don't want to add to her injuries."

Geoffrey glanced away unhappily as he realized she must be going to see Roy.

By Saturday afternoon Geoffrey's health had deteriorated so much that he called George Fellowes.

"I've been a bit under the weather. Sorry to be a bore, but do you think you could drop in here?"

"Yes, of course. Will tomorrow do?"

"No," said Geoffrey. "I rather think you'd better come today."

Alarmed by this unaccustomed display of weakness, George drove straight over to Geoffrey's.

When he had finished his examination, he stood looking at Geoffrey with a grave face. "You stupid young fool," he said. "How long have you been like this?"

Geoffrey shrugged himself back into his shirt. "It feels like years," he said. "But the pneumonia set in yesterday."

"Well, if you feel up to it, you'd better go and pack a bag while I do some telephoning. I'm putting you in the hospital."

"Oh, nonsense! I can stay here."

"Hospital."

With an effort, Geoffrey got to his feet. "I've a good mind to show you the door and treat myself," he said, but without any real conviction in his voice. He walked as far as the staircase. When Dr. Fellowes came out of the consulting room a minute or two later, Geoffrey was still leaning against the banister.

"Do you know, I don't think I can make it," he said in apologetic disbelief.

"I'm not surprised. Now perhaps you'll start taking your case seriously. Come along, old chap, you'll feel a lot better in bed. They're expecting you at St. Mary's, and I've said I'll drive you over."

Talking cheerfully, he assisted Geoffrey out of the house and drove him away, still protesting, to the hospital in Bardenford.

The news of Geoffrey's illness was slow to reach Jenny. She returned home late on Sunday evening, and Sam was unaccountably missing. Mick had fed him early that morning, but had not seen him since. There was still no sign of him Monday morning, and Jenny put a notice on her gate as she left for work, but no one came forward to say they had seen him. She missed him more than she would have believed possible.

It was the middle of the week before she knew that Geoffrey was in the hospital, and then only because Bob bumped into Mr. Alderney and told him.

"You didn't know?" he asked, noticing her pale face and shadowed eyes.

Love is like the wild rose-briar;
Friendship like the holly-tree.
The holly is dark when the rose-briar blooms,
But which will bloom most constantly?

Emily Brontë
Love and Friendship

Jenny shook her head. "Is he very ill?"

"I gather so. Not actually in danger, but seriously ill, yes."

"Will you—be going to see him?"

"Later on perhaps. I don't think he's allowed many visitors yet."

It was the beginning of a bleak period for Jenny. Every instinct demanded that she go straight to the hospital and see Geoffrey for herself, but she forced herself to carry on as if his illness meant little to her. And her assumed indifference carried her through a meeting with Wanda when she encountered her in a shop a few days later.

"Poor Geoffrey!" Wanda said lightly. "You know he had pneumonia? I blame myself for sending him out to play golf in the rain when I knew he had a cold, but really, one would expect a doctor to take better care of himself."

"Yes, I had heard," Jenny said briefly. "Have you been in to see him?"

"Oh, I have been in to the hospital every day," said Wanda, omitting to mention that this was in the course of her normal duties as a Friend of St. Mary's and that, apart from one brief visit, she had not been allowed to see Geoffrey. "You haven't been in yourself?"

"No."

"It would probably be a waste of time; he isn't allowed many visitors. Of course, with my special standing . . ."

She had not intended to mislead Jenny when she used that phrase, all she was thinking of was her long association with the hospital; but when Jenny lifted stricken blue eyes and said in a carefully controlled voice, "Do you mean you have some—some special relationship with Geoffrey?" she lowered her eyelids and spoke deliberately and maliciously: "Well—we have been talking about marriage," she murmured.

Jenny worked steadily through the rest of the day, blind and deaf to everything about her. By evening she had made her decision. Living next door to Geoffrey and on bad terms with him was saddening; to stay and see him married to Wanda would be past bearing. As soon as she got home she stepped over the garden wall, and went to call on Mrs. Wantage.

The doors and windows of the house were tightly shut. Jenny wondered whether Mrs. Wantage had gone away, and she glanced in through the kitchen window to see if there was any sign of her. Mrs. Wantage was there. She was sitting in a comfortable chair and Sam was on her lap, curled up in a warm, complacent ball, while her hand rhythmically stroked his silky fur.

Jenny tapped on the door and got no reply, so she opened it herself and walked in. Sam immediately sprang up from Mrs. Wantage's lap and came to meet her.

"So you've come back, have you, you naughty boy?" Jenny said. "Where did you find him, Mrs. Wantage?"

Mrs. Wantage avoided her eye. Jenny glanced round and saw the dish of cat food and milk underneath the sink, the tray of earth in the corner, and understood.

"Has he been here all along?" she asked.

"The little thing got lonely, you being out all day. He came in here for company."

"I see. If I went away permanently, would you look after Sam for me?"

"I suppose I might," Mrs. Wantage said in her grudging way.

"I have decided to go back to London," Jenny said. "I came in to ask if you would move into Berry Cottage and look after it for me when I'm

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gone, and I suppose Sam had better stay with you, too."

Jenny gave in her notice at the office the next morning.

"I've decided to go back to London."

"I thought you liked it here," Bob said. He sat back and looked at her in mingled exasperation and compassion. "Don't you think you ought to make some attempt to sort things out with Geoffrey before you do anything drastic?"

"There's not much point," Jenny said. "Geoffrey is going to marry Wanda."

Bob stared at her. "Never," he said with complete conviction.

Jenny shrugged. "She told me so herself."

Bob hesitated, then decided to say nothing further. He had been given permission to visit Geoffrey that evening, and provided his friend seemed strong enough, he would take the matter up with him.

He found Geoffrey propped up on the pillows looking white and thinner than usual, but obviously on the way back to health.

"You look fairly ghastly," Bob said. "How are you feeling?"

"Not too bad. A bit weak."

"Strong enough to hear some news you aren't going to like?"

"I suppose so," Geoffrey said. "Something about Jenny?"

"You're very quick. Yes, Jenny is going back to London. It shook me when she said she was leaving. And I'll tell you something that shook me even worse. Jenny says you're planning to marry Wanda."

Geoffrey looked up at that. "I certainly am not," he said. He hesitated, then added, "Look, just between the two of us, the lady asked me and I said no."

"Good heavens!" Bob looked at him in horror. "That must have been quite an experience."

"It was," Geoffrey agreed.

"I don't know what you've got that I haven't," Bob complained, skating over the awkwardness of this admission. "All the girls seem to go for you."

"Except the one I want," said Geoffrey.

"Jenny?"

"Yes, of course."

"But Jenny practically swoons every time your name is mentioned."

"Well, she's going back to London because she's got a boy friend called Roy up there, whom she prefers to me."

"Roy?" said Bob with a puzzled frown. "I think you must have got that wrong. Jenny says she's going back to her old flat because there's a vacancy there now—since her friend Sandra just married a bloke called Roy."

Goeffrey sat up straight and stared at his friend. "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes, of course I'm sure. She went to the wedding the day you were taken ill."

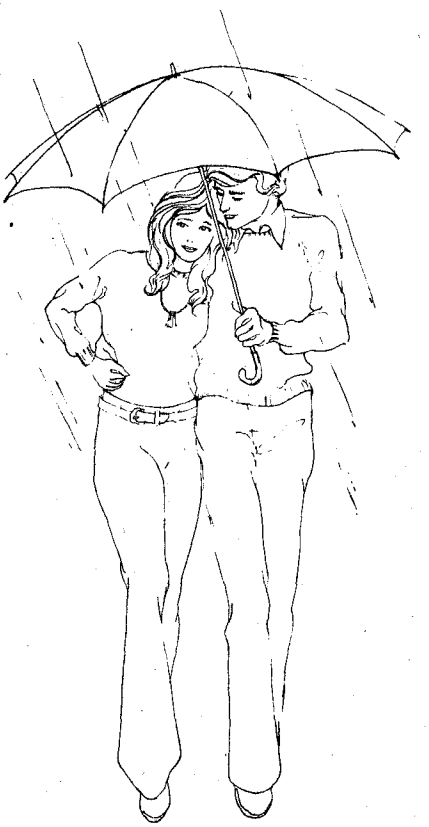
"And she doesn't seem upset about it?"

"Not a bit, except she says she feels sorry for Sandra."

Geoffrey sank back, looking even whiter than before. "I might have made a mistake," he murmured. "I was so sure . . . but I suppose I could have misunderstood. Bob, look, you've got to make Jenny come see me. I don't care how you do it, but I must see her."

"I thought it would come to that," Bob said with resignation. "All right, I'll see what I can do. But you'd better make her happy this time, otherwise I'm liable to come back and strangle you."

Bob gave considerable thought to the way he was going to approach Jenny. Fortunately, this was one of the Saturdays on which she was due to work in the office, and he was able to say, quite casually, "I went to see Geoffrey last evening."



The pencil in Jenny's hand jerked her shorthand pad. "How was he?" she asked.

"Pretty bad," said Bob deliberately. "But I can tell you one thing, he is certainly not going to marry Wanda."

"Did he say so?"

"Yes—one of the few coherent remarks he made."

"Do you mean he was delirious?" Jenny demanded incredulously.

"Out of his mind, most of the time I was there," Bob said. "Especially when he started talking about you. Jenny, I know things haven't been going well between you, but I honestly think you ought to go see him. There's something on his mind, something to do with you, and I don't think he'll start getting better until he has sorted it out."

Jenny stood up. "Shall I go now?"

"Not right this minute," Bob said, a little startled by the effect he had produced. "Another twenty-four hours won't kill him—I mean it will give him time to build up his strength a bit. Why don't you go tomorrow afternoon?"

Jenny lay awake that night, consumed by anxiety for Geoffrey, while Geoffrey, having been assured she would visit him Sunday afternoon, slept a deep and dreamless sleep and felt better the next day than he had for a very long time. All the same, it seemed ages before the door of his room opened at three o'clock and Jenny stood on the threshold, looking at him doubtfully.

She was wearing the long cotton skirt of mauve and white, with a sleeveless T-shirt in dark purple edged in white. She looked wholly and impossibly delectable. She hesitated in the doorway, surprised at the sight of Geoffrey—paler than usual certainly, and with hollows in his cheeks that made her want to cry, but sitting up in bed and reading a book.

"Hello," she said tentatively.

"Hello," Geoffrey replied. He held out his hand, but Jenny stayed where she was.

"I thought you were supposed to be terribly ill," she said, with a puzzled frown.

"I've had double pneumonia," Geoffrey said defensively.

"He told me you were raving in delirium!"

"I was when he told me the reason you'd gone up to London recently was to get Sandra and Roy married off to one another. I wish you'd come over here and sit down."

Jenny advanced slowly into the

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room.

"Jenny, is it true? About Sandra and Roy?"

"Yes. They're married now."

Geoffrey was watching her closely. "And you don't care?" he asked. "I mean, you aren't upset about Roy marrying Sandra rather than you?"

Only a moment; a moment of strength, of romance, of glamour–of youth! . . . A flick of sunshine upon a strange shore, the time to remember, the time for a sigh, and–goodbye! Night–Goodbye!

Joseph Conrad
Youth

"There was never any question of Roy marrying me!"Jenny exclaimed. "Ugh! What a horrible thought!"

"That weekend when he came to stay with you," Geoffrey said carefully, "I went out into the garden rather late. There was a light on in your back room and two people were there, a boy and a girl. Roy and you, I thought."

"That must have been Roy and Sandra," Jenny said. "She turned up, too. They had a flaming row, but then they made it up. I expect it was rather torrid."

"It was," said Geoffrey. "I didn't mean to watch, but . . ."

Geoffrey drew a deep breath then wished he had not, because it made him cough. Jenny watched him with a worried frown, anxious for him, but still cross at the way she had been tricked into this visit.

"Why didn't you ask me about Roy?" she asked bleakly.

"I was going to, and then I saw you with Bob in the garden the next evening, and he again the following night, and I started remembering what I'd gone through with Angela . . . Jenny, can you ever forgive me?"

"Yes," said Jenny. "I can understand how it happened."

"So will you please, please, drop this idea you have about going back to London?"

Jenny had perched herself on the end of his bed, well out of reach.

"No," she said. "I understand your mistake about Roy, but I still think I ought to go away. We hurt one another too much. Can you honestly say you've been any happier for knowing me?"

"I've been alive," Geoffrey said. "I love you, Jenny."

"Do you?" said Jenny. "How about Wanda? She seems to think you have some sort of commitment to her."

"Well, I haven't. That is absolutely definite. You'll just have to take my word for it."

There was a short silence, which Jenny obstinately refused to break.

"Have you written me off completely?" Geoffrey asked. "Jenny, do you remember that Sunday we spent at my parents? I don't think I've ever been happier in my life than I was that afternoon."

"But that was the day everything got spoiled," she pointed out sadly.

Geoffrey leaned back on his pillows and looked at her. He so richly deserved her doubts, yet he was convinced that their relationship could emerge from this present trial strengthened and deepened.

He coughed again and struggled to sit up straighter. "I wish I were stronger," he said in an exhausted way. "Jenny, I can't argue with you any more, I don't feel up to it. But I may as well warn you—if you go to London I shall certainly come after you. Now, before you leave me will you please pull these pillows up? It's bad for me to lie flat."

Jenny responded automatically to his appeal for help. She was thinking as she began to plump up his pillows that it was going to be very difficult indeed to withstand Geoffrey if he made a really determined pursuit of her.

A warm, hopeful happiness began to grow in her; it was rather nice to think of his coming in search of her. Dwelling on this, she failed to notice that Geoffrey was by no means as exhausted as he had given her to suppose. As she slipped the third pillow behind his back, she suddenly found herself seized round the waist. She gave a startled exclamation as she lost her balance.

"Now," said Geoffrey, "words having failed to convince you that I love you and you love me, I'm reduced to using brute force—or as much of it as I can exert in my weakened state."

He bent his head and kissed her with all the pent-up longing of the last difficult weeks, and Jenny, breathless and indignant, struggling against a ridiculous bubble of laughter welling up inside her, tried to be unresponsive, and failed.

"You fraud," she said, as soon as she was able to speak. "You're supposed to be ill."

"I am," said Geoffrey. "I'm beyond hope. I'm slain with love for a fair, cruel maid. Save my life, Jenny."

"If you put it like that," Jenny said with as much dignity as she could muster, "I suppose I can't very well refuse."

Her arms slid round his neck, almost of their own volition, it seemed, and he began to kiss her again. "Considering my frail state of health, I think I'm managing this rather well," he said at last. "Do you love me Jenny?"

"Yes," said Jenny. "Much more than you deserve, you horrible, conniving creature."

"If you love me at all it's more than I deserve," said Geoffrey quietly. "I'll try to do better in future, my darling. Kiss me just once more."

The door opened and a nurse came in. "Dr. Alderney!" she exclaimed in scandalized tones. "What do you think you are doing?"

Geoffrey raised his head. "Miss Bertram is giving me the kiss of my life," he said. "Go away."

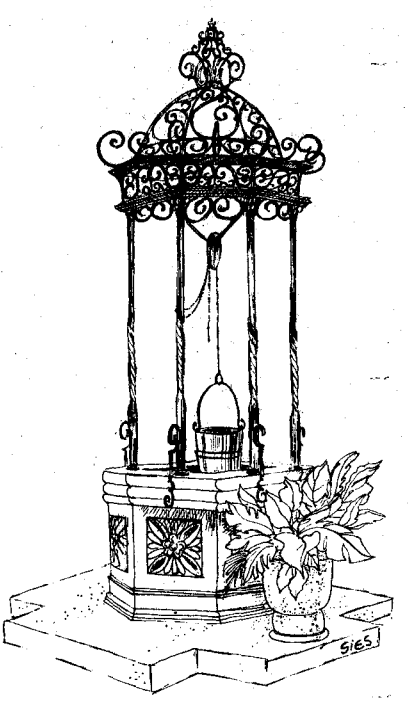
She went, with an indignant swish of her starched skirts, and Jenny gave way to helpless laughter. "Oh, Geoffrey, do you think she's gone to fetch Matron?"

"Quite possibly. My reputation is in ruins. I shall never be able to show my face in St. Mary's again. There's only one possible solution."

"What's that?" Jenny asked, extricating herself from his grasp and sitting up, her face flushed with love and happiness, her hair in wild disarray.

"You will have to marry me."

"Yes," said Jenny. "I suppose I will."



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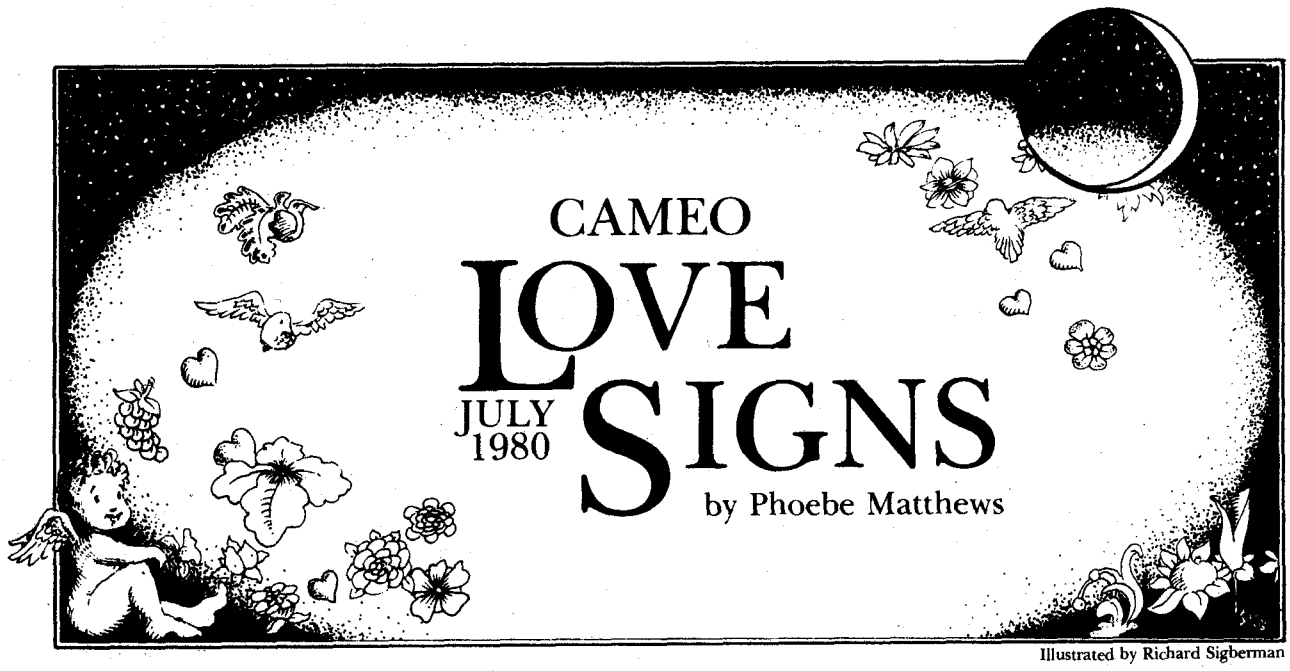

CAMEO LOVE SIGNS

JULY 1980

by Phoebe Matthews

Illustrated by Richard Sigberman

Cancer

JUNE 22-JULY 22

While the sun lingers in your sign, loving Cancer, its July warmth opens your hidden longings like the petals of a flower. Sun gold is your color this month, to revel in and to add its glow to your jewelry and cosmetics, subtly changing and highlighting your summer beauty. With the clever planet Mercury to guide you, your decisions will enhance your future. Although an old lover may cast the shadow of angry words over your heart, if you remain faithful to your own beliefs, the love star Venus, languishing in your House of Secrets, delights you with some memory from the past that you will truly cherish. *Romantic days: 11, 12, 21*

Leo

JULY 23-AUG. 22

Unpredictable Leo, while the July sun lingers in the garden of your House of Secrets, you pluck for yourself an unconventional romance, a shimmering flower that mysteriously changes as its petals unfold. Whether you reach out and open your life to passion, or relish its joys in the privacy of your daydreams, the thrill of secrecy will enhance your memories. With Venus in your House of Friends, look for love among those you know best. You are a fire-bright person and your summer mood luxuriates in the rich red-orange of poppies, found, perhaps, in a forgotten summer frock at the back of your closet, a link with another happy summer from your past. *Romantic days: 3, 14, 23*

Virgo

AUG. 23-SEPT. 22

The light, romantic shades of the old-fashioned honeysuckle reflect your charm, graceful Virgo, so surround yourself with its pale yellow-green and its evening scent. With the clever planet Mercury in your House of Friends, wise words from a faithful companion could turn your thoughts towards new and rewarding choices. Venus, ruling your midheaven, hints that career and love do sometimes blend. Although the worries of an empty pocketbook temporarily disturb your Virgo calm, at mid-month powerful Mars shines in your House of Fortune to smooth your path, while a tranquil romantic interlude brings harmony to your July pleasures. *Romantic days: 16, 26, 27*

Libra

SEPT. 23-OCT. 23

A sentimental mood, dreamy Libra, touches you with remembered bliss through a lover from the past and stirs longings that trouble your reverie as Mars shines its passion on your House of Secrets. A déjà vu feeling about a recent encounter mystifies you, but as summer slips by, you will understand more perfectly the meaning of your dreams and visions, leading to an unexpected but welcome improvement in your fortunes. With glamorous Venus in your House of Journeys and clever Mercury near your midheaven, a vacation could create fanciful and fantastic memories. The dark blues of delphiniums relax you now, so linger in their cool colors. *Romantic days: 1, 18, 29*

Scorpio

OCT. 24-NOV. 22

The July sun in your House of Journeys wafts your wandering heart on gentle breezes, lucky Scorpio, to dream locations, as thoughtful Mercury smoothes your holiday plans and passionate Venus tempts you with a hint of mystery. A friend and lover from the past entices you down garden pathways, continuing to offer choices that could subtly change your lifestyle. All the bright hues of July, spinning from rocket red to flag blue to summer white, enhance your charms this month, expanding your enjoyment of luxury. When the moon glides through your sign during the third week of July, a quixotic love memory gently touches your present life. *Romantic days: 12, 21, 30*

Sagittarius

NOV. 23-DEC. 21

Although you usually prefer the brighter colors, vibrant Sagittarius, July matches your special glamour to the purple shadows on a summer evening. Let this cool, sensuous color drift around you like a summer cloud in a swirling caftan or the scent of lavender. While the love goddess Venus changes her mind in your House of Alliances, the sun moves into your House of Mystery, spinning your heart in a fireworks blaze of confusion. With masterful Mars moving into your House of Friends, reach out to an old, familiar love for understanding and compassionate comfort, but do not rush unthinking into a daydream solution that could melt and leave you broken-hearted. *Romantic days: 6, 11, 23*

Capricorn

DEC. 22-JAN. 20

Although you are often worldly-wise and realistic, enticing Capricorn, the fiery emotions of the planet Mars cross your midheaven, enriching your July meanderings of thought with inspiration, spiritual awareness and more than a glimmer of dairvoyance. If the gentlemen in your life change places in your affections as rapidly as colors change in a summer sunrise, you are being subtly influenced by a sun-moon opposition. The love goddess Venus adds to your glow, matching your energy to the carefully patterned thoughts of wise Mercury in your House of Alliances, while shades of bright sun yellow enhance your

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beauty and help gain your heart's desire. *Romantic days: 8, 17, 26*

Aquarius

JAN. 21-
FEB. 19

A rainbow of colors usually tempts you, charming Aquarius, but July finds you longing for clear yellow and white touches to brighten your summer costumes or perhaps for a gold-toned rinse to bring out the sunshine in your hair. While the moon drifts through your sign in the first days of July, it shines on passionate Venus in your House of Lovers, hinting at romantic summer interludes. While you try to reason through every whim of your kaleidoscope imagination, Mars entices you down a path of someone else's fortune towards a mysterious journey. Let careful Mercury in the House of your Well-Being guide your thinking in this perplexing and tempting deicision. *Romantic days: 1, 9, 28*

Pisces

FEB. 20-
MARCH 20

With the July sun gleaming in your starcast's House of Lovers, July weaves a typically Piscean romantic spell, enticing you with the charms of a witty gentleman. With Venus in the House of Your Home, this month truly means for you that home is where the heart is. Pamper yourself with the luxury of restful afternoons on a shaded lounge eating summer fruits and other nourishments that you know will restore your natural bloom. The sweet, soft yellows of daisy hearts add happiness to your everchanging moods, so let the color please your mind and eye in something as overflowing as a kimono or as small and fragile as a teacup. *Romantic days: 3, 11, 30*

Aries

MARCH 21-
APRIL 19

If the July stars are toying with your heart, radiant Aries, you may find guidance in romantic Venus, even now changing direction in your House of Messages, bringing secret promises of confusion and delight. Passionate Mars enters your House of Alliances, tempting your fancy with the prospect of an unconventional love affair. If the elusive planets wrap you in clouds of confusion, search carefully for your heart's dream and look homeward for guidance. Match your exuberant nature with the vivid touches of geranium red, whether you plait it in your hair in ribbons or let it overflow your favorite vase in a romantic bouquet. *Romantic days: 5, 15, 23*

Taurus

APRIL 20-
MAY 20

Venus, the love goddess and ruler of your sign, leads your heart along a star-bright trail of wealth and fortune this July, fanciful Taurus, and captivates you with diversions and surprises. When the moon slips through your sign in the first week of July, Venus brings a change of heart and Mars encourages you to make your own choices. As July closes, Mars discards an old love and moves on to calmer, more peaceful summer pursuits, bringing weariness if you attempt to overreach your heart's goals. The pale greens of grassy lawns, copied in satin ribbon, could tie up your love letters or trim a lacy peignoir, adding the magic of garden color to your favorite July moments. *Romantic days: 7, 17, 25*

Gemini

MAY 21-
JUNE 21

With the love goddess drifting through your sign this month, golden Gemini, you may be tempted to languish in her soothing rays, but if you wish to widen the horizons of your heart, a romantic adventure of your own choosing could begin the second week of July. If you handle your heart as wisely as you manage your fortune this month, July's closing could overflow your pockets as well as introduce a new and thrilling love. Were you any other sign, Gemini, you would be overwhelmed by the dual presence of Mercury's wisdom in your House of Wealth and Mars' passion in your House of Lovers, but being you, you will weave both into the summer gold of your most cherished dreams. *Romantic days: 9, 22, 26*

NEXT MONTH IN CAMEO—

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by Mary Kistler

Julia's desperate search for her sister leads deep into the dangerous jungles of Peru . . . and deeper into the mystery of Captain Sorenson's dark secret.

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by Anne Neville

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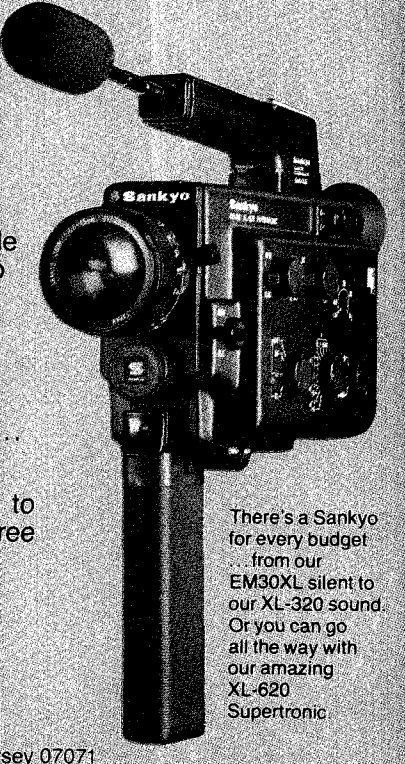

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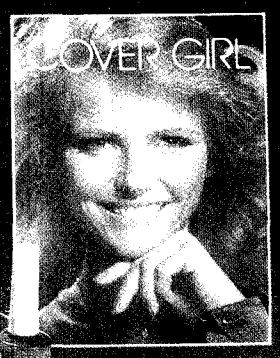

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